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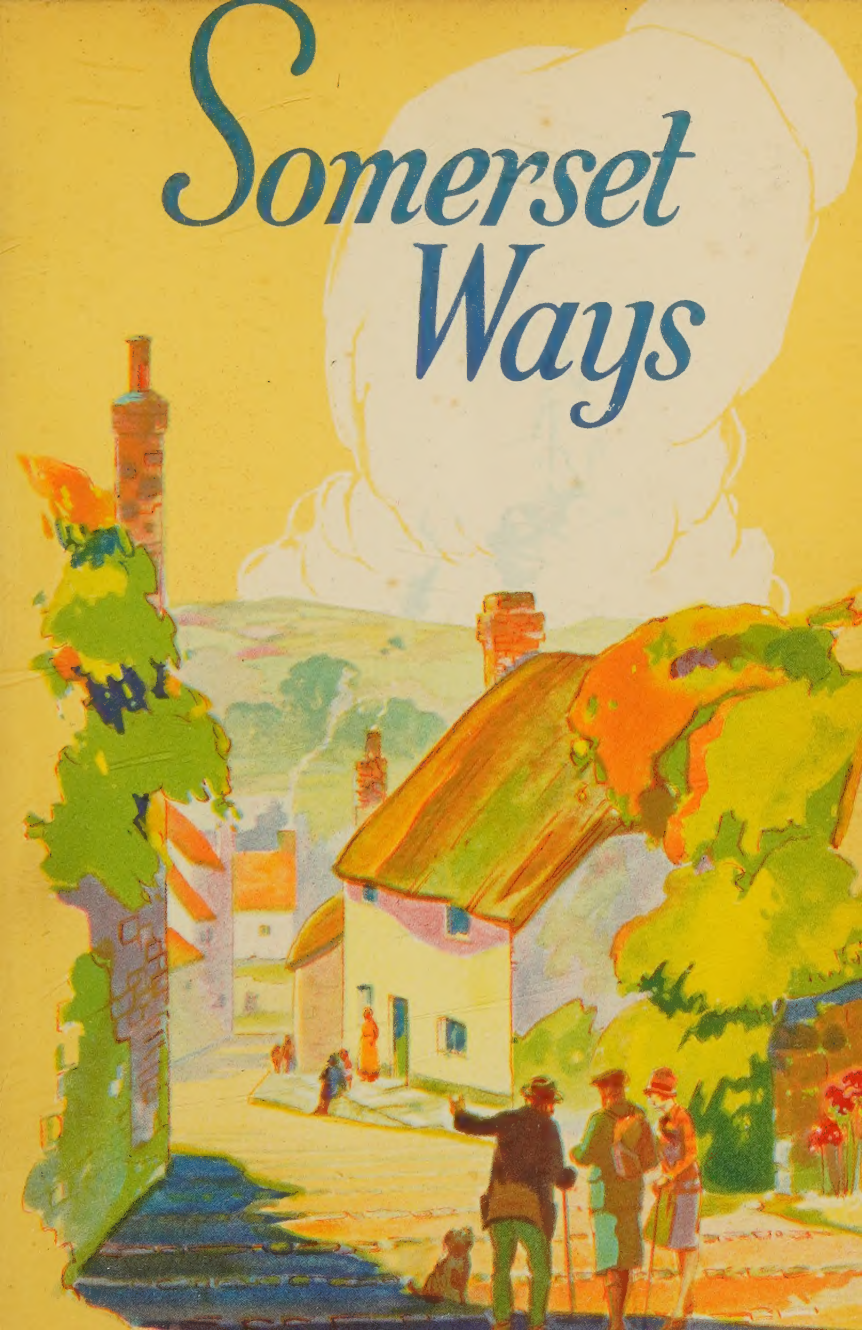

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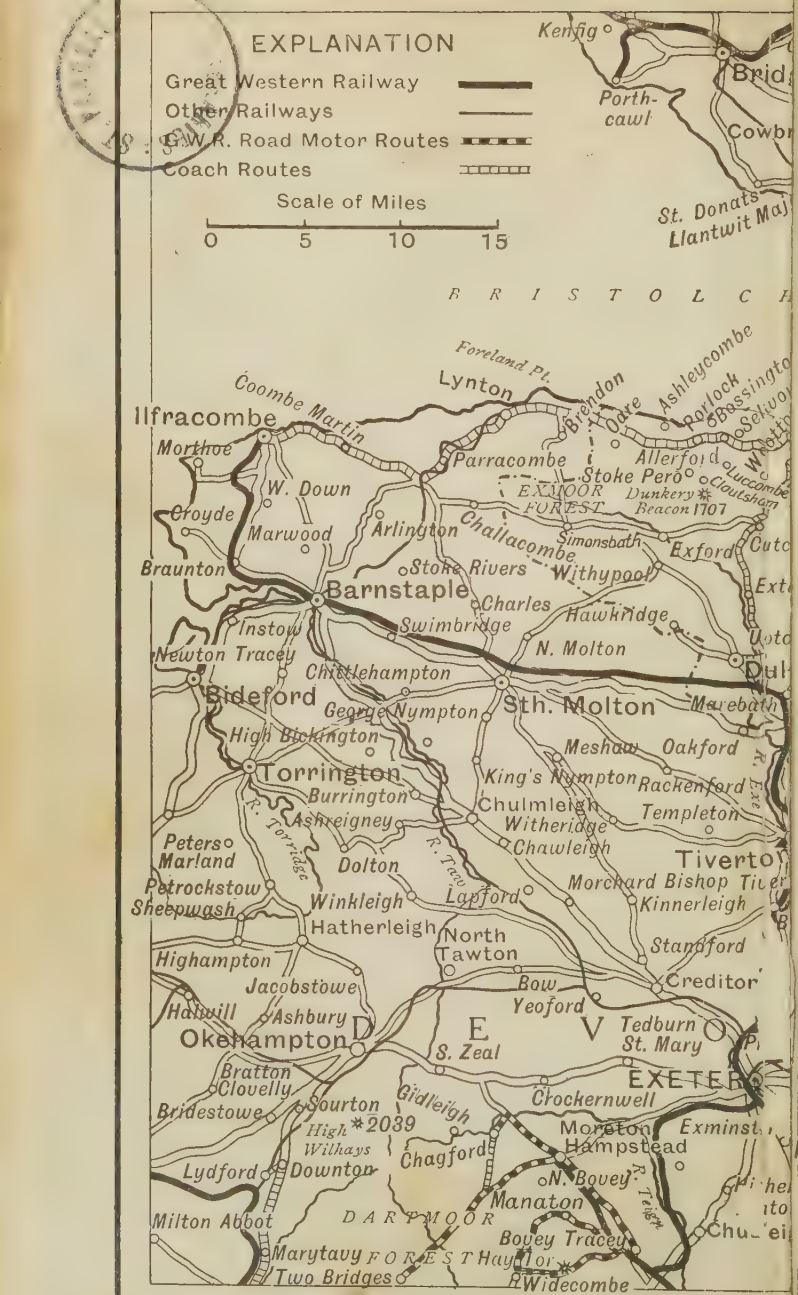


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# "Somerset Ways."

(*Second Edition*)

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Rural Somerset "

# SOMERSET.

THE ideal England—the land of soft hills, blossom in Springtime, and deep thatch—lies south of Thames and Severn. For East are the flat lands, where the Fen-men dwell almost a race apart; and in these later years great stretches of the Midlands and North are but dreary blackened wastes, until the wild far Northern hills are reached. But for our comfort, South and West still stand much as our fathers knew them, and our fathers' fathers years before.

Very old is this land, very old yet perennially fresh, like the Spring, child of a thousand thousand winters, which comes with nothing but of new born youth upon its face. A land of infinite beauty, and of infinite variety. For we can but notice that besides their common heritage which makes them English, each of these southern shires has something personal to itself, its individuality.

Thus Sussex is Downland: land of chalk-hills, of sunshine and flying shadows of clouds and the passing of winds from the sea. Hampshire is Wessex: full of the glory which tradition gives, full of soft beauty too, of deep willow-fringed rivers, high beech woods, and with villages beyond compare. Dorset is quiet and beautiful and lonely: a land old beyond telling, full of colour in Autumn, in Spring lovely, but never gay. Devon is known to all, long since crowned Queen of the South, with her wondrous colourings, her cliffs, her moors, her lanes.

And Somerset is Home.

For it is here in Somerset that the longest journeys end, that the greatest wanderers come to rest. It is a land of peace and stillness. There is no call of homing like that

which comes from the land 'twixt Mendip and the western sea. For this country above all others has kept the spirit men call homeliness, the spirit of warmth and welcoming. Not a cottage in the whole great span but invites the wanderer in, or a rick or a hedge for the roofless ones but seem kindlier than the shelters of other lands.

Three things one finds here: an oldness, a kindness and a wisdom: things in part of the countryside, in part of the dwellers in it. Things most plain to see in the slow West Country courtesy, the natural gentleness which seems a heritage of all those born in sight of Glastons Tor.

Kind folk they are, with the kindest accent of any of our race. The folk here do not change; to-day they are the same at heart as when they, alone of all England, gave Alfred shelter; not because he was King, though they were loyal people, but because he was homeless and alone.

While we are Christians, we must bow to Somerset: for it was here, at Glaston, that our forefathers first heard the tidings from the East which changed the world for all time. Here it was that our first Church was built: only a hut of clay and wattle yet the Mother Church of the great Cathedrals.

And as a race we must look back to Somerset as to a great and honoured school. Did not England learn her chivalry around the Vale of Avalon? Here were lived those lives which gave to us our wondrous heritage of tradition: tradition which to this day lives unsuspected in the heart of each of us, moulding the character and destiny of our nation. Great is the debt that England owes to Avalon.

Such is the land we now call Somerset. A land full of quiet, gentle beauty; very old, very close to Nature, and so almost unchanging as the years slip by.

If we could catch the stories which the wind tells to the trees and the trees tell to the hills we should find the

"spirit" of the land, that unsubstantial something which gives each stretch of country its personality, its character.

Because the face of Somerset is very varied, these stories would be very varied too. Warm and happy would be Quantocks tales. Wild and free and yet ever with a sigh for home, those which Exmoor would tell. Mendip's stories would be of cold clean sorrow, very human and very tragic in their humanity: while the villages of the foothills and the plains would tell the age-long tales of birth and death, of quietness and peace and the wheeling of the great Star-armies.

In this book we shall wander in many towns, take many journeys, see many things: yet much we shall not see. Inevitably we must miss far more than we can hope to discover, spots fully as beautiful as those we visit we must leave aside; because there is not a village, not a single farm in the whole of Somerset that we could not spend a week over.

There is Cheddar. Scarce a dozen lines have we given it and yet there is an epic to be written around this haunt of western quaintness. Some day this epic will be written, and then Cheddar will wake to find herself even more famous than her Caves and Cheeses have already made her. And then also there will be answered many questions. We shall know why there are so few dogs in Cheddar village; how it came to pass that Cheddar did not build her own Market Cross, but begged or borrowed or obtained it somehow else from a near neighbour. We shall be told also the truth of that traveller's story that on a Saturday forenoon none may wash in Cheddar, save only those who have wells of their own: because, so the story goes, that is the time chosen by the folk of Axbridge and distant Highbridge to wash down their pavements, for which purpose they use not only their own, but Cheddar's share of the mutual water supply.

Or we might make a long chapter of every walk that one may take from Cheddar. Up the Lippit, and so over the cliffs by the Pulpit rock and down the gorge by the Fir Wood path—so home. Or over the hill called Round-house and back by Shipham Gorge, a walk to be especially remembered for the wonderful variety of flowers you may find.

So might one continue, without end, not of Cheddar alone but of every village and townlet in Somerset.

There is one thing for which our Somerset should be especially noted, above all other shires; the wonderful views she has to show. Almost all alike in their sudden unexpectedness they are alike in nothing else. At least a dozen views there are each more wonderful, to a Somerset man at any rate, than the finest prospects anywhere outside her borders.

To many that from Crooks Peak is the most wonderful of them all. Yet there are those from Dunkery, from Selworthy Beacon; from the Quantock heights and from the Polden ridge. There is the great spread of land below you as you stand on Glaston Tor; and Brent Knoll, that other Isle in the Marshes, has also famous views. The strange mixture of hill and flat land which Somerset presents accounts for the great beauty of her distant prospects.

But perhaps the best of all to a Somerset man, who wants to see the whole of his inheritance at once, is the view from the old Roman Fosse way where it leads over Beacon Hill in the Southern Mendips. For from here you can see the whole county, Bristol and Bath and the hills between; the bordering Downs of Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon, and far away, blue in the mist, the broken hills of the West, which fall to the Channel at Countisbury and Hangman Hill—which are in Devon: while the great curve of the Channel embraces all that land, flat and hilly, bare and wooded, which is our home. A prospect very beautiful at sunset, when the low slanting rays pick every

Cheddar Cliffs

Bath Abbey, West Front

detail out in clear relief, yet even better at sunrise, sunrise in blossom time especially because of the wondrous promise of it all.

Then for those who do not always keep to road or trackway, and few will in Somerset, there is a spot among the hills between Wells and Shepton worth a long day's march to find. Soft tree-clad hills are there, suddenly sinking down and spreading out to form a long green valley, the Vale of Avalon. Full of softness, wonderfully fresh is this vale, and at the foot of it stands Glastonbury Tor, smooth, inimitable everlasting—as it has stood since long long before King Arthur trod its slopes, long before its green height first piloted the Christian Pilgrims to our shores. And beyond the Tor are the plains of home, marked white and grey and vivid green where man has settled on them.

These splashes and the hedges to the fields alone tell that man has taken this land for his own. Nothing of modernity is visible. Somerset has a wonderful power of preserving that which is old and beautiful, whether it be a winding lane lined by thick rose-strewn hedges, or a group of deep-roofed cottages under some great forest trees, with a roadside pond where the horses come to water in the dusk.

Chapter I.

# BATH.

"LIKE a Queen enchanted," sang Swinburne, of Bath in what is surely one of the most beautiful poetic tributes inspired by any City. One cannot wonder at the tribute, for man has wrought well at Bath and never was Nature in more bountiful mood than when she moulded this cup among the hills, with the Avon wandering across it, and with the wonderful waters of the mineral springs bubbling up their offering to human sufferers.

Bath has a right to be proud. A right to consider the quality of men and women with a critical eye. For she was founded, so the story goes, by none other than Bladud some time King of Britain, a great-grandson of Venus herself. He, the founder of Bath, was father of King Lear, a worker of handy miracles who did much for the site and City. Presuming too much upon his descent from the immortals he set out to make the conquest of the air. Whether it was jealousy among the Gods or a simple misunderstanding of Nature's laws we know not, we only know that he was dashed to pieces on his first attempt at flight. Thus Bath lost her founder and another legend was created.

To come down to things acceptable to the historian, Bath was known to the Britons and there are indications of a settlement there in the dim times we know as prehistoric. Then when the Romans came with their wonderful gift of practical vision, they soon discovered the healing properties of the waters. No town or city in

our country has so much to show of Roman handiwork as this. After Rome recalled her legions the Saxon came ; Edgar was crowned here. And so down to our own time, for a long two thousand years has humanity flocked to her healing waters. What a pageant of life ! Almost every name of note in our history, in our literature, and in our art, has sounded in the streets of Bath ; a bare list makes imposing reading. No city, other than London, has had such an illustrious list of visitors and residents in modern times.

But let us see Bath as she is to-day. For such a purpose there is no better vantage point than Beechen Cliff, the sharp-rising hill above the railway. From here Bath is seen to lie in the centre and around the lower edges of a smooth-sided cup formed by the gentle dipping of the surrounding hills. Close at the foot of Beechen runs the Avon, wandering through parks and gardens and between the grey buildings of the City. Towers and spires rise from the mass of stone to catch the sunlight, and here and there a wide street or open space breaks the formality. Very grey is Bath, scarcely a building here but those of the native stone : so the city looks very cool with her border of green hills.

The streets of Bath are of many characters, some in the lower town are narrow, but the greater number are wide and wide-paved, imparting an airy, leisurely aspect to the town. Milsom Street claims to be the finest street in the Kingdom ; it will not be that while Princes Street Edinburgh still stands, but with its wide road, fine buildings, and gentle upward sweep it is indeed a royal thoroughfare. It is outside the centre of the town, away from the necessities of business, that the finest characteristics of Bath are best shown ; Royal Crescent, Queen's Square, and Pulteney Street are domestic architecture at its best.

But fine though her streets and squares are, the real glory of Bath is not in them, but in her gardens.

The Royal Victorian Park is a most attractive place in which to spend a sunny hour and it has one of the finest collections of botanic specimens in the West Country. With a sheet of water, sunny lawns and shady walks, its great variety of shrubs and trees, and with the inner enclosure of the Botanic Gardens with rockeries and shady nooks it is indeed a charming place, wonderfully kept and groomed as are all Bath's open spaces.

Sydney Gardens again are a most welcome haven on a hot day, with their tree-shaded lawns. But for the blazing summer days the Institution Gardens have even greater attractions for they are bounded on one side by the Avon, deliciously cool as it tumbles in a cascade over a deep weir. Up the river shop-crested Pulteney Bridge spans the water with its three graceful arches; across the stream lies the Recreation Ground, where County Cricket reigns, and beyond that are the tree-clad Hampton Downs.

The "sights" of this City are many, but greatest interest is centred in the old Roman baths, and greatest beauty in the Abbey—the latest of the great Perpendicular Gothic works in our country. There is a fine harmony about this building, a harmony impossible in a creation of many different periods, such as most of our great Cathedral churches are. The exterior is so enchanting that one would wish a better view of it than the close-pressing town allows. The West entrance, with its magnificent carved door, is a fine portal leading to the Abbey's greatest glory, the Aisles; for there is a wonderful play of light here, a wonderful perspective of slim white pillars and a traced roof of exquisite beauty. The Nave is high and narrow, with liberal window spaces; the transepts noticeably short. A building of a real charm but, alas, so full of furniture and memorials that the lines are often lost, the temporary obliterating the permanent.

The modern baths are magnificently appointed buildings, but not unnaturally they lack the glamour of

Bath and River Avon

Roman Baths, Bath

the Roman structures, for these are probably the most complete relics the Empire left to us. The great rectangular bath, the smaller circular one, and the many more scattered remains, are wonderful testimonies to those who built them, knowing nothing of modern tools or modern methods of construction. We may wonder how much of the building of our own time will endure for near two thousand years. Truly the men of old built for an Empire to endure.

Bath has a number of late eighteenth century public buildings of some interest. The Pump Room, though much altered and restored, is of this period, as are the Guild Hall and the upper Assembly rooms: while the Royal Institution is somewhat later.

There can be few, if any, cities which have appeared so frequently in the literature of our country as has Bath. This is not unnatural, since she has been a home, temporary or permanent, to so many of the great republicans. It gives us a new interest in the life of Bath in the days of her glory to read of it in "Harry Richmond"; probably Meredith's picture was a true if flattering one. He also used the city in "The Tale of Chloe."

"Pendennis" contains a sketch of Bath, and one can but wonder if the elite of the City were entirely absent from the mind of the great master of satire when he wrote that most intriguing of books, that on "Snobs"—a book which keeps you in a state of perpetual chuckling as other people's snobberies come under the searchlight, only turned to a most excruciating feeling as the scalpel suddenly turns and probes your own. But "Snobs" is not a book of Bath: it is a book of the whole world.

"Humphrey Clinker" is a Bath book. "The School for Scandal" was written around the Society there: while "The Rivals" was written in the City and probably contains much "local colour," as does Fielding's "Tom Jones." No writer working in Bath could quite eliminate the atmosphere of the place from his books.

Dickens had some delightful digs at Bath Society in "Pickwick." He was a master of contrast, and it is difficult to imagine a greater than the immortal Sam in Bath. Jane Austen used the City in several of her books, "Persuasion" in particular giving a vivid little picture of it when past its glory.

And the greatest of the moderns has immortalised Bath in two of the "Wessex Novels"—"Two in a Tower" and "Far from the Madding Crowd," but both of these are but slight interludes in the stories. Why is it that Bath alone retained its own name in the "Wessex" tales?

Bath-buns, Bath-chaps and Bath-chairs are "household words," but the one purely local product is the world-famed Bath Stone. You may eat fresh Bath buns in Edinburgh—the city has no monopoly of any of these minor products—but Bath Stone is inimitable.

Strange destinies await these great freestone blocks, cut and blasted from the rolling uplands around the valley wherein the City lies. Many countries have they seen: far-off India's sun has burned them without avail, while the fogs and dark of the greatest city of the world have worked no harm to them. The City Temple is Bath Stone. Stately Longleat was once deep in the native hills. Stone that the Romans quarried went to the building of the same baths that you may still see, almost perfect to this day—after a life as long as Christianity. Later the Saxons delved here for stone with which to build a temple in their new-found faith; some years agone was this, yet at Bradford-on-Avon this same Church stands but little altered by the rubbing of time.

There is not only history in the use of Bath Stone, but in the cutting of it. Way back before the Norman masons and Norman methods had given way to Gothic they built at Malmesbury, in Wiltshire, an Abbey, one of their masterpieces: they built it of Bath Stone cut from the quarry at Box. Over a thousand years later

repair work was undertaken on the ruins of this Abbey, and the stones required were cut from this same quarry. So that maybe a stone was cleft in two by Norman hands, a part transported from its native hills, set in a new and strange environment—to be followed at an interval of nine hundred years by its fellow piece. And yet some folk will tell you that there is no romance in industry!

There can be few cases of such continuity of production from one source. It will help you to realise the extent of this Box quarry. It is a veritable city of pathways, rooms, great halls and gigantic corridors, stretching for miles beneath the hills, a perfect maze to a visitor but as well known to the workers there as are the streets of Bath.

A wonder race—Man—to seek in the inner recesses of the hills; to cut and hew and shape and polish the dull and lifeless stone, and from it to create a grey fairyland such as Bath.

The river Avon flows to Bath down one of the most delightful and most purely English valleys in the country: soft rounded hills with here a wood and there a thicket, wide lush meadows fragrant with meadowsweet, with Avon slipping through its palisades of rush and willow-herb where the willows hang long slender branches out and dip their fingers in the dimpling water.

Only a few miles of the upper Avon are of Somerset, just before the ancient little town of Bradford is the Wiltshire border. But in Somerset is one of the gems of the whole valley—Limpley Stoke. A delightful little village this, set in a most romantic part of the valley where the meadows are richest, the woods deepest and the world and its worries most distant.

There is fine boating on the Avon, fine bathing too. The wild life of the valley is prolific, varied and extraordinarily interesting. If you love the beauty of natur in her softest and most generous mood "far from the madding crowd" you will love the Avon valley.

## Chapter II.

# THE CHEESE COUNTRY.

THAT grand old road that runs, or rather *ambles*, south-westward from the city of Bath to the busy town of Yeovil passes through what we may call the great Cheese country. A land of wooded hills and rich well-watered valleys—perhaps the richest dairy country in the world.

Like the cheese which is its most famous product this stretch of countryside is simple and wholesome—it puts on no airs, not pretending to be a popular holiday centre or to be contributing much to what we are beginning doubtfully to regard as "progress"; it succeeds in being wholly and most delightfully English.

It is difficult to describe the lie of the land in a district like this because there are no well-marked ranges of hills, no great river valleys. The countryside consists of a medley of hills and valleys, reminiscent of the waves of a choppy sea. This gives a peculiar charm to the landscape, you can never see vast distances but you are always coming on to new delightful pictures. You never know what the top of the next little rise will disclose to view—it may be just a valley where the sleek chestnut cattle are at pasture, it may be a group of grey farm buildings surrounded by a little sheltering wood, or it may be one of the delightful town-villages of which there are many hereabouts.

Our road is never far from the county boundary. It runs south parallel with the Wiltshire border and then turns west to follow—at a distance of five or ten miles—the northern heights of Dorset. But though so near these

George Inn, Norton St. Philip

Steps and Carvings, St. John's Church, Frome

sister counties the countryside is thoroughly Somerset in character and so are the small towns and villages. The first of these of note is Norton St. Philip, seven miles out from Bath. The guide book describes it as "a place of antique appearance," which indeed it is. Its great pride is the George Inn which claims to be the oldest Inn in England. Whether it is this or not it certainly is a magnificent building—timbered front, bay windows, a stair-turret and fine chimneys.

Norton St. Philip is a village. Next you will find a town, Frome. And Frome really deserves a chapter all to itself. Its attractions are due more to its situation and lay-out than to any particular charm of architecture. The average house in Frome is square and plain but the streets are arranged in so remarkable a manner that the town is full of delightful and unexpected charms. The wide market place is dull—except on market day when it is as busy and thriving a spot as any in the west—but leading out of it is Cheap Street, a wide paved alley, with good shops on either side and a little river singing merrily down the centre. Then at the head of the market place another paved alley leads to St. Catherine Street which is probably the steepest shopping street in the country. It is narrow, and amazingly prosperous and busy considering the gradient on which it is built.

But Frome's prides are two: the Church, restored and rebuilt during the last century, is particularly notable for two fine approaches, one up a wide flight of steps on the walls of which are a series of carvings illustrating the *Via Crucis*, and the other leading through arched gateways to a wide paved space before the west front. Outside the east end of the church is buried Bishop Ken, a good brave man who befriended Somerset when she sadly needed it. But perhaps most of the people who go to Frome on pleasure bent go to see Vallis, the lovely valley that lies a mile west of the town. It is indeed beautiful, though hardly more beautiful than a dozen other valleys in this

district. But it has one great advantage, in that the river Frome is larger than most streams hereabouts so that the charm of water is added to the valley's sylvan beauty.

But we linger on our road when we should be passing through Nunney—where there is a fine old castle that really looks as if it was protecting the village, not overaweing it—on our way to Bruton, a clean and charming old town and the birthplace of R. D. Blackmore, the author of " Lorna Doone." One of the best views of Bruton is that from the railway which shows some fine architectural groups, one of the finest of which is modern.

Over a little range of hills and down in the next valley from here lies Wincanton, an old town and a fine one. It is small and not busy but it has an air about it—it is dignified as befits a place of such antiquity and it stands at the head of the great vale of Blackmoor, which, lower down, has formed the setting for some of the greatest of the Wessex novels. No reader of " Tess " is likely to forget the vale of Blackmoor.

Wincanton is a little off the road that we set out to follow, but it is such a charming old town that it is worth the diversion. You return to your route to travel one of the most delightful roads in Somerset, from Bruton, past Batcombe, which has a magnificent church—to Castle Cary ; which disputes with some fifty rivals the right to be considered the prettiest village in England. However that may be Castle Cary is lovely. It is grey and lies tree embowered. It has wide spaces, an ancient market cross and a most shapely old stone bridge across a rippling stream.

Beyond Castle Cary the road to Yeovil soon passes close to Cadbury, where there is a vast and most interesting earthwork. But you should not miss Cadbury even if you are not interested in earthworks, because sound tradition tells us that once Cadbury was known as Camelot, and it was at Camelot that Arthur held his court.

The old name has been retained almost unaltered in the near village of Queen's Camel.

Yeovil, which marks the end of our journey, is unlike most Somerset towns. It has entered the manufacturing business and has done well at it, and that without sacrificing its character of a very pleasant country town. It is busy and prosperous and clean, and the country surrounding it is equal to any in this part of Somerset. It has a noble church, very stately without and graceful within—and it is a church you can see, it is not crowded around by lesser buildings as is the fate of so many of its sisters.

If you ramble over the hills to the north of Yeovil you may suddenly get a foretaste of those vast and lovely views which are typical of Somerset. There is a spot high up here from which you look northward and see Glastonbury Tor with the marshes and the sea beyond and the great hills that ring round the plain.

## Chapter III.

# MENDIP LAND.

THE call of the hills, that soft impelling message from the uplands, is born into some just as the more insistent call of the sea is born into others. There is some intangible elusive fascination in the high places, not only the charm of the clear unsullied air and of the wide-stretched landscape, but something closer to the heart than these. It is as if Nature, like the rock, were closer to the surface here.

No weather can mar the beauty of the hills; rather the more unrestrained the elements the more is the beauty of the hills apparent. To have fought through the buffetings of the unscreened wind; to have felt the sting of sleet straight from the great grey dome; to have seen the rain driving in solid sheets over the high moor, or to have seen the mist rolling like a silent irresistible wave, blotting out sky and earth and sea, is to have known Nature untouched by man; and to have seen majestic beauty.

The Mendip Hills have full share of this charm: they have none of the beauty of outline of the soft South Downs, none of the colour of Exmoor, or of the wild grandeur of the Dartmoor Tors, and yet once you have known them you are theirs to the end. A note of sadness pervades them, the clean, cool sadness of Nature, the note of all notes to which the human heart is tuned. They leave a memory of broken lines of rolling olive-brown downs; of sharp limestone crags; and of old grey stone walls, splashed with the green of many ferns and the lighter colour of the quaint round-leaved Pennywort.

Cheddar

The Grotto, Cheddar Caves

Briefly, the Mendips lie westward from Downhead midway between the quaint old towns of Frome and Shepton Mallet, almost to the sea. True it is not until Binegar is passed that you find the true Mendip character, but from there right to Crooks Peak, the western spur, is pure Mendip. From the East the ascent is gradual, but on all other sides the slopes are steep, sometimes sheer cliff, but more often sharply cut hillsides, so precipitous that nothing but close turf or a few hardy bushes can find a roothold between the broken rocks. The table-land of the range is gently undulating downland, deep cut by wonderful ravines—Cheddar and Shipham Gorges, and Burrington Combe, great clefts in the hillside, formed, we are told, by the ceaseless action of some long-lost rivers on the limestone rocks. Similar causes are assigned to the caves and swallet holes ; these last are spots where the rivers once plunged downward, into the centre of the hills. For the phrase " solid as the hills " has but little meaning when applied to Mendip for the whole ridge is honeycombed by caverns ; the long-lost rivers which cut them are no more and the entrances of only a few have been found, but those which have been explored are among the marvels of the underworld.

To reach the ridgeway from Wells, Shepton, or Frome you may take footpath or road up to the " Hunter's Inn Lodge," the nearest of the solitary Mendip hostelries. The rise is steep. The Gorges of the western hills are here replaced by " bottoms," deep wooded valleys, nestling in which are little farms surrounded by pasture. Over all is abundant vegetation. Sheltered from the north and sloping towards the sun the very walls shoot greenery from their wide unmortared joints. The few villages are all of grey stone and the country here has a warm, sheltered air unlike the further table-land.

Before the " Hunter's Inn " is reached and onwards towards Priddy, the country changes. The gradients are less abrupt, trees cease, the pasture of the slopes gives

place to close sun-scorched yellow turf and boundaries are no longer marked by hedges but by loose grey stone walls, broken in places by cattle straying in search of better feeding than the poor shrivelled turf affords.

The air is clear and crisp ; yet, though we are high above the plains, the view is closely-bounded on every side by the gently-swelling ridges of the downs. Some tall isolated chimneys tell of the now abandoned attempts to re-exploit the ancient mines. Deserted cottages are not uncommon and presumably because of the abundance of local building stone these are not demolished, only the door and window frames are removed. The skeleton habitations add to rather than detract from the loneliness of the scene. A few stunted, wind-swept pines stand clustered in the hollows and trees of less hardy type, imported perhaps as shelter, stand bare and white, stripped of their bark, the embodiment of desolation.

In the midst of this desert of browns and yellows lies the green oasis of Priddy. The road becomes fringed with bushes, closing to form a hedge as it slopes down to the shallow dell where the village, half hidden in a roll of the hill, nestles amongst green trees. It is here at Priddy that one first discovers that Mendip was occupied in that dim period when history emerges from legend, by a people who have not passed without leaving some memorial. There are many traces here of those lost " fathers of the race " ; barrows, where they sleep here at Priddy and at Nine Barrows and less obvious signs in many a disused quarry. Then came the Romans, leaving here as everywhere their passage written for all time in the hills. An amphitheatre near Charterhouse, lead mines at Nine Barrows and Priddy and, best of all, the track of their road from Old Sarum to the sea : these have they left us. You may still trace the old highway, down which toiled many a weary slave laden with the products of the mines, to Uphill or to Brean Down, where the ships of the Empire lay waiting for it.

Two miles from Priddy stands the " Castle of Comfort Inn," a name to conjure up visions for the traveller who has had a long day's tramp across the hills. It has another claim to our interest ; it is the centre of the region marked by the ancient colonists and the track of the sea-road runs before the door.

Along the Roman trackway we find the same clean, arid, fresh yet cheerless country as around Priddy. Near by runs the modern road down to Burrington Combe, skirting the foot of Blackdown, the highest of the Mendip Range. From the crown of Blackdown the whole table-land lies behind you, mile after mile of gently rolling brown slopes, with here and there a green bottom or swallet-hole, or a grey crag peeping through the thin turf covering, while towards the sea the country falls away to where the ancient village of Winscombe lies hidden in the foothills.

A few miles east of Winscombe the Blagdon valley begins, a wide fertile wooded vale that runs back into the heart of the hills holding half a dozen delightful old villages and the new homesteads of many Bristol folk.

Here is Burrington Combe, a rocky gorge on a smaller scale than that at Cheddar but still impressive—and entirely unspoiled. Beyond is Blagdon village perched on the hillside above a great lake that fills the valley, the reservoir of the Bristol water supply. There are few villages even in lovely Somerset more delightfully situated than Blagdon. Beyond again the road runs on through the sweet old hamlets of Ubley and Compton Martin to the Harptrees—East and West—two villages in the heart of the hills. From here you may retrace your steps or may go on to Priddy or to Cheddar down the gorge.

Between Blackdown and the western corner of the range are two valleys : Shipham Gorge, a wild, rock-walled ravine, where great quarries and a most unlovely lime-works spoil the natural grandeur, and then a further and more gentle dip in the ridge where the Bristol road comes

over Shute Shelve Hill to run downhill to little Axbridge. Across these valleys are Winscombe hill and Crook Peak, the outposts of the Mendips.

Crook Peak is to many a Somerset lad the cardinal point of the compass. "Toward Crook Peak," "West of Crook Peak," or "Behind Crook Peak" are everyday phrases as far away as Glastonbury, Langport, and Bridgwater. Indeed, the distinctive "crook" can be seen from almost anywhere on the great plain or from the hills beyond. Unlike so many of the Mendip peaks, it is a clean-cut, shapely hill. From the Winscombe road a path, cumbered with rocks and broken stones, skirting the sides of bramble-filled hollows, runs up the ridge. The ascent is steep, the last part over almost bare limestone, until the top is reached, and the "crook" a rugged crag many feet above the surface of the hill.

England is a country of beautiful prospects. There are the scenes stretched out before the eye from Leith Hill, over the weald and wooded hills of Surrey; from Stoner with the South Downs stretched below; from Dunkery over the purple and golden glory of Exmoor, and from Hay Tor with line after line of rock-tipped peaks fading back into the inner mystery of Dartmoor. None of these has the perfection of that from Crook's Peak. To the north lie the rolling downs and wooded valleys towards Clevedon; behind, to the east, is the great bulk of Blackdown and the waste of Mendip; before you and to the west the Channel sweeps round the grand curve of Bridgwater Bay. Across the water the mountains of Wales stand clear-cut yet shadowy against the cloudless sky. Marking the furthest point of the bay stands Minehead, backed by the heights of Exmoor. Nearer, hiding the lower slopes of Exmoor, the Quantocks rise almost from the sea and run inland, a wooded range with the perfect contours of the South Downs, they sink into the more gentle hills of Polden where Taunton lies hidden in a shallow valley; the Poldens and Blackdowns sweep round to

Crook's Peak, near Axbridge

Blagdon

join the hills of Avalon, which again merge into foothills of Mendip nearby Wells, completing a great circular amphitheatre.

Within this circle lies the great plain of Somerset, streaked by the ribbons of the wandering Axe and Parrett and their many tributaries. From this height the whole plain appears uniformly flat, save where Brent Knoll breaks through the surface like an anthill ; right to the seashore stretches the plain, and you can well believe that in the days of Camelot the sea-wash covered it and that Avalon was an isle in the marshes. Avalon lies to the south, by the unmistakable Glastonbury Tor ; to the south also are the moors—Wedmore moor, Westhay moor, and Sedgemoor of bloody memory, now moors no longer, but ploughed land and pasturage.

The face of the Mendips is revealed, stark grey rocks rising like a gigantic wall straight from the plain, a clump of firs and a dark line in the cliff mark Cheddar. Axbridge lies close to the cleft of Shipham Gorge, almost hidden in the hills. At your feet the cliffs give place to downs, always the parched brown Mendip turf ; and Waverling Down runs back into the heart of the hill forming a green cup where nestles Compton Bishop.

To describe the Gorge of Cheddar in words which should paint the whole would be impossible. We can only, at the best, give some fleeting impression, some vignette of grey-brown cliffs towering above the road which winds its gradually descending way along the course of a long-vanished river.

It runs from where the hills near Priddy take on the form of a shallow valley, down where the sides draw in, grow steeper ; where the turf gives place to scrub and the scrub to rock ; past the Pine Wood which goes climbing up and over the rugged side, down to where even the pine can find no roothold—where the cliffs stand sheer and overhanging and then draw back, leaving a wide grassy margin on either side of the road which twists its way

around the great upstanding crags ; still down to where the road with a last sudden turn emerges from the gorge into a great cleft in the hillside, where a hidden river comes rushing cold and dark out from the heart of the hills, spreading to form a lake round which are grouped the little white cottages of old Cheddar.

Only by some such outline as this can one describe the Gorge. No eye can fully grasp the majesty of that rock-walled ravine at first sight. To those who know and love it well, Cheddar is firstly not the towering cliffs, but a picture of purple marjoram climbing over and between the rocky ledges, splashing with colour the sun-flecked cliff face ; or a picture of a vertical cliff-wall, with one grassy shelf sloping across it high above the road where the Cheddar Pink, most perfect of all our wild flowers, sends forth its coral red blossoms from amidst the long, slender grey-blue leaves ; or a picture from the upper slopes of chattering magpies, their black and white standing out with startling distinctness before the more tranquil tints of grey stone walls and the olive-brown sweep of the distant downs.

Up on the cliff-tops a path runs to where the pine wood climbs the side to meet it. Here is a land of air and sunshine ; the face of the hills curving round on either hand, the great plain before you, and at your feet a sheer drop to the ribbon road down in the Gorge, winding round to the little reed-fringed lake and the clustered white village.

The gorge is impressive at all times and in all seasons, but at sunset it takes on an indescribable mystery and grandeur. Should you be in the gorge near sunset walk up to it just beyond the Wind rock—the great crag round which the road makes a serpentine double bend—and climb the sloping bank on the left. Looking back you see the deep ravine in misty darkness save where the shafts of low sunlight which slant across it pick out rugged crags and towering pinnacles with a warm glow. Mists swirl up the gorge before the chill evening breeze and

darkness begins to settle down in the narrow defile like a solid thing. Then, if you are lucky, the moon peeps over the sheer southern cliffs and makes a symphony of black and silver.

Mendip is a country of beautiful names: Goblin Combe, Midsomer Norton, Rowberrow, Kilmersdon, Crosscombe and Christon, and to hear these from the lips of son or daughter of "Zummerset" is a joy to jaded ears; for it is here in the hills that one finds the perfection of the most musical the softest and most charming of all our English dialects.

Chapter IV.

# WELLS—THE CITY OF PEACE.

WELLS must be approached in a spirit of reverence, because it is the City of Peace and peace of all things most deserves our reverence; perhaps because it is the rarest and most difficult of the virtues. So let us start upon our pilgrimage to Wells with heart attuned to its beauty.

Wells is the City Beautiful, and yet of no other town is it so hard to say, "Lo, the beauty is here!" or "Lo, it is there!" This is because the beauty of Wells is as much in its perfect harmony as in the individual buildings which comprise it. Nowhere else can be found such perfect blending of contour and colour, such a harmony of age and above all such a homogeneity of spirit or atmosphere as that which Wells gives forth in every street, from every wall. And because of this, and because of the age-long, time-worn beauty of it all, Wells is the City of Peace.

Almost infinite in its variety of beauty, we can roam for weeks together through its clean, well-paved streets, over its great Cathedral green, and every day find some fresh quaintness, some new vista where art and nature have conspired to make a picture.

But should you wish to gather the whole of it into one view, a view to symbolise it all, go up into the wood that clothes the steep western slopes of Torr Hill, a stone's throw from the Palace walls. There from a clearing in the woods you may look out on what is surely the most perfect picture man ever had a hand in making.

Framed by the deep green foliage and red brown trunks

Vicars Close, Wells

Wells Cathedral

of two graceful pines the City lies at your feet. The centre and the crown of it is the Cathedral, a building of fragile beauty with its many pinnacles and yet grandly solid in its grey gleam of age. It stands like a strong fine-featured mother over the little township, not dwarfing its surroundings, but protecting them and forming the focus and the centre point of its life. Never was such a jewel as this and surely never such a setting. For to this day there stand around the mother-church those buildings which of long heritage belong to her. On the near side is the Palace with grey walls overgrown with green, surrounded by the rippleless mirror of the moat, eloquent of stillness. Beyond, across the pinnacles of the most graceful of Chapter Houses, the Chain Gate leads to the grey seclusion of the Vicar's Close. Encircling the Church and its dependent buildings are the homes of the layfolk, little red or grey groupings roofed with quaint tiles, with chimneys of every shape that is neither ugly nor obvious, from which the clear blue smoke curls.

Around it all the stillness and the silence of the hills : for Wells is set in a cup, a cup of green-grey foothills of the Mendips. Mendip has set her spell upon the City.

So Wells stands, peaceful and mysterious, for the comfort of man and the confusion of Time.

Because of that harmony of every part which makes Wells what she is, it is difficult to describe the city in detail without a monotony of phrase. And yet there is no monotony about the place itself. No two buildings are alike in anything but their air of changeless peace, no two streets in anything but their clean quiet and no two of the many gateways in anything but their graceful solidity and texture of age.

These gateways are, after the Cathedral, the most notable feature of Wells. They are of every size, from the great Palace Eye down to quaint Penniless Gate where in bygone days alms were distributed. Each is a perfect specimen of the architecture of its day ; each has the

added charm of a vista of quaint streets, old courtyard or forgotten corner where moss and lichen blue the grey stone walls. So entirely in keeping are the archways that one never pauses to wonder at the number or the beauty of them, but accepts them as an essential part of Wells.

Among such archways as these each perfect of its type it seems invidious to single out one for special notice, yet one cannot refuse it to the Chain Gate, for the Chain Gate is celebrated not alone in Wells but throughout the country as perhaps the most perfect mediæval span left to us. It is a gateway but more than that, for over it runs a passage-way from the Cathedral itself into the Vicar's Close. The perfection of its proportions, the shapeliness of the archways, the spacing of windows in the passage above and the grace of its many pinnacles gains not a little from its position, joined on the one side to the Cathedral and on the other to the Vicar's Close.

The Vicar's Close is, like the gate which gives access to it, unique. "Grey and matchless" has been fitly used to describe it. It is a little street or cloister, call it what you will, flanked on each side by grey cottages with roofs and chimneys of unexampled beauty appearing above the greenery which thrives wonderfully about the house fronts. Before each tiny homestead is a garden, such gardens as only England can show, and a wall before the gardens separates them from the broad-flagged pathway down the centre. Truly a haven where the most restless soul might dwell at peace.

Here in times past dwelt those of the less exultant orders whose duty lay within the Cathedral. Their head the Bishop dwelt across the Cathedral from here, in the Palace which still stands, hardly altered. A building magnificent and beautiful, set on a moat-encircled fairy island, with a drawbridge and bold walls to remind you of the times when a Bishop had to be a man of war at need.

But at Wells this was more a show than a necessity.

You feel that Wells could never have attained its present state of peace had it seen stirring times, and the historian upholds this view. For Wells has given him but little material, tucked away as it is in a little backwater, away from the plains where battles were waged so many times, on no great road to attract the adventurous and with no riches to tempt the spoiler. Indeed were it not for the Cathedral one feels that Wells would long ago have sunk into a permanent sleep and have become that most depressing of places, a decayed market town ; but from this fate the Cathedral has saved it.

There is a second Church here, St. Cuthbert's which were it not for the close proximity of its great sister would have been famous for its beauty. It has one of the finest Perpendicular towers in the country and the interior, where lofty graceful pillars in long rows support a wonderful wooden roof, is of beauty exceptional even in this county of beautiful churches.

Little has been written here of the town of Wells and yet there is much to write. The High Street, broadening out into the Market Square, is one of the most satisfying streets in the world. It is clean and well paved but has no flash modernity about it.

The Market Place is equally attractive except for the corner where the Post Office is and the Town Hall. This last is an ugly erection smacking more of the modern than anything else in Wells and yet in this same building the last Abbot of Glastonbury stood his trial and the great Judge Jeffreys held his court ; the two events which mar the perfect peace of Wellsian history.

Now, knowing what manner of town surrounds it, we may come to the Cathedral. Such is indeed not the usual way, but it is the better. For to rush hurriedly into the precincts of the great Church without some moments spent in the town where the dust and rush of modern life may be toned down, until the spirit of the place has prepared us for the great climax towards which all

Wells leads, is to risk an imperfect view of this most perfect of buildings.

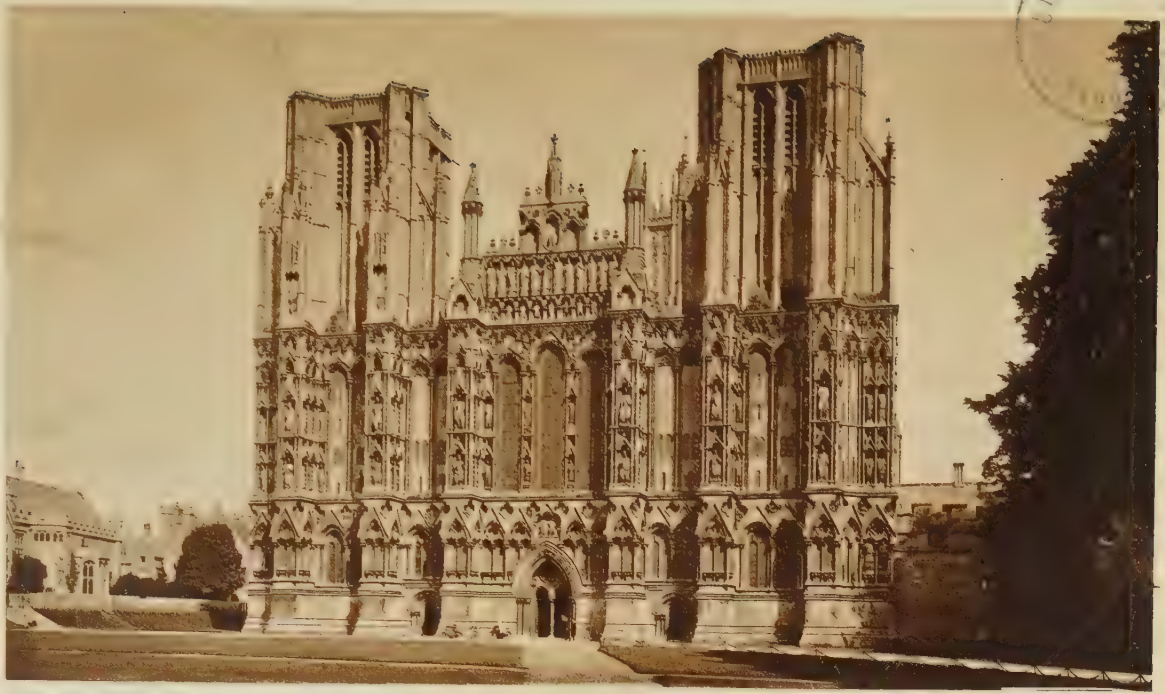
Wells Cathedral is not so large as York, so ornate as Exeter, so old as Durham, nor so full of history as Winchester : yet for beauty it is unrivalled. One never says in Wells : " this is too high " ; " this too squat " ; " that window should be larger," or " this pillar less massive." For from the glorious West Front up to the eastern wall every stone fulfils its purpose. You feel of the details of Wells that they are inevitable. They are so absolutely right one cannot wish a hairbreadth altered in them. And that surely is the great test of builded art.

There is much to admire in the exterior of Wells and little to criticise. The centre tower is more than graceful : it is a fit crown to the wonderful pile of wall, window, buttress and roof which it commands. There is no monotony here, no sameness and yet the whole is perfect, far more harmonious than it could have been made by repetition and by symmetry.

It is the West Front which has done more to make Wells famous than anything. And we cannot cavil at the taste which has selected this for special veneration. Unless it be the great North Porch with its wonderful arcades and vaulting no portion of the building is so perfect as this.

To sit on the low grey wall which bounds the great green, when the sun is turning westward and touching the front with light and shadow is to realise to what height man's art may rise. The solid grandeur of it and yet the humility, the broad, clear-cut outline of it and yet the intricacy of the details. The message it so plainly gives, the question it asks of each of us, makes it far more than an architectural feature, it makes it a wonderful human document. Such indeed is every one of the many figures which enrich it, such is the whole—a testimony and a message.

Ruskin, most critical of critics, was enamoured with



Wells Cathedral, West Front

Wells Cathedral, view from North Transept

this wonderful West Front, and many a man unversed in art, unused perhaps to deep thought has had a sudden wave of feeling surge across his life as he stood before this monument of human love and sacrifice. Many are the buildings which impress, few are those which raise the finer feelings, but Wells is one of these few.

The cloisters at Wells have served in many a picture—cool, shady passages where one may wander free from all noise save the deep boom of the clock, disturbed by no movement save the rippling of wind in the grass plot where sleep the fathers of Wells.

The Cathedral interior is the beautiful inevitable. Nothing else, no other style or treatment could so perfectly balance the exterior. It is a building where sunshine seems natural—a clean, white building full of airy space and yet so void of bareness that there is nothing of that cold loneliness with which some fine churches chill you.

The inverted arches supporting the central tower are unusual and to that extent disconcerting at first sight, but they too tone into the great conception and at last seem to fill a natural place. The lines of the nave are mainly horizontal giving a distinctive and most restful effect. In the South Transept are some pillars carved with wonderful skill, by some old craftsman who had more than a little sense of humour. These heads, character studies every one, are perhaps the most human and humorous images that ever decorated a place of worship.

The Organ Screen is white and lovely and its fretted arch leads to the choir, a contrast of shapely white pillars and solid black stalls. Nowhere is the characteristic lightness and grace of Gothic work shown better than here; even on the dullest day there seem to be sunbeams lurking among the vaulting of the roof.

Perhaps the Presbytery or Retro Choir is the most graceful part of the Cathedral proper, though many would claim that title for the Aisles with their long vista

of graceful curves and perfectly proportioned pillars. Here, behind the choir, it is possible to study more closely the workmanship of the vaulting and to admire the perfection of its design.

Joined to the Presbytery by perhaps the most perfect bit of roof-vaulting in the building is the Lady Chapel, once, it seems, a building separate from the Church. A small but exquisite chapel where despite the lightness, you feel the depth and mystery of that which it enshrines and commemorates. For there are deep shadows here, deep quiet and deep peace.

There is another building of and yet not in the Cathedral. From the North Transept a double doorway leads to the most perfect flight of stairs ever man set foot on. A broad stone stairway lit by side windows. It has two destinations, leading straight up and over the Chain Gate to the Vicar's Close, and sweeping up and to the right to the Chapter House. Wide and shallow are the steps, worn by many a sandalled foot, and the light from the windows and from the entrance to the Chapter House plays softly on the stone. Beyond the arch which leads to the Chain Gate the whiteness of the stone throws the near shadows into sharp relief and makes the grace of the curving window lines and the sweep of the steps still more prominent.

We may describe the Chapter House in two ways. Firstly by saying that it is a high octagonal building: a marble pillar rising from a broad plinth in the centre splays out high up and joins the vaulting of the wall pillars which divide the wonderfully fretted windows. Or we may simply say that this Chapter House is as the Belfry of a Fairy Palace. No one who knows it will dispute the greater accuracy of the fanciful phrase.

Here we will leave Wells—in the wondrous lightness and grace which man has carved and built from stone. For every pilgrimage should have an end which makes fit climax to it, which rounds off and completes its beauty.

Glastonbury Abbey

St. Joseph's Chapel, Glastonbury

## Chapter V.

# "AVALON."

THERE are in this England of ours places with more of the clash of arms, the making of kings, the noise of history in their records than Glastonbury can claim. There may be places which have seen more of the pomp and pageantry of bygone days. But there is no spot in the world so woven around with mystic webs of fable and romance as this. No spot can hold more wondrous store of legends—legends so interlaced, history and folk-lore, folk-lore and pure romance, that none can tell exactly where runs the golden thread of truth throughout it all—only that the whole web is shot with gold.

For Glastonbury is Avalon. Avalon, first spot in all our homeland to hear the tidings from the East. Centre of the most noble chivalry that ever men gave lives for. Here is St. Patrick buried, here King Edgar rests. And here lie noble Arthur and human Guinevere his Queen. The Holy Thorn took root on yonder hill, below which was the Blood-stream, its source the Holy Grail, the quest of Arthur and his Knights.

Frankly to the seeker of the golden romance of Chivalry or of the spirit of a glorious long-past age Glastonbury town is disappointing. The Abbey is far otherwise, for here still lingers the haze of myth and legend that form the perfect background to such things and after all the Abbey is most of Glastonbury.

The town itself is modern and unlike most Somerset towns largely red brick. A modern market cross of Gothic pattern reminds you of the first duty of the little

towns, to link the country and the cities into close union. Just above the Market Cross stands the grand old Pilgrims Inn, in startling contrast to the prosaic modernity of the streets around it. Truly a wonderful and wonderfully preserved relic of the 15th century, built we are told to accommodate the pilgrims who flocked to the holy shrine. A strange place for the travel-worn, dust-soiled pilgrim to rest his head, more used to the humble cot or the cell of some hospitable monk. But maybe it was not that type of pilgrim for whom the inn catered ; for every class and rank visited the holy shrine.

Above the Pilgrims Inn stands a companion building, companion at least in style. The old Tribune or Court House where at one time the Abbot gave his judgments and later, in a year sad in the memories of Somerset, the grim Jeffreys sat. There are few buildings which give such a vivid sense of history as this comparatively humble one. Few other buildings of note remain in Glastonbury. The Almshouses, with their own chapel in Magdalene Street and two Churches are the sum of them. St. John's is a fine pile with a tower fit to compare with any. It is a parish church to be proud of with its wooden nave roof, carved stone pulpit and air of age and wisdom.

St. Benignus is a Church of less interest in itself, though it also has a fine tower, but its dedication is unusual as its history. St. Benignus was a follower of St. Patrick and wishing, perhaps, to lay his old bones beside those of his leader, he came to Glastonbury in his old age, built a hut and lived as a hermit should. When in the course of years he died his wish was granted, and he was taken to the Abbey for burial. On the way thither the bearers rested and where they set the coffin down a church was raised in memory of the holy man.

Legends such as these abound in the West Country and they make interest in even the most unpromising places. Mythical though they may sometimes be they shed a far truer light on the lives and thoughts of our

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Glastonbury, Market Place and George Inn

Glastonbury Tor

ancestors than can any recital of historic fact. For a people's history may be largely moulded by outside influences but their legends grow up within their own hearts.

But these are lesser things. For the lover of the ancient and the beautiful there is but one building in Glastonbury—the Abbey. Let us attempt to picture this " sweet, grey ruin, set in a sea of green."

No paved mosaic floor is here, no roof to veil the splendour of the skies. Straight from the close, clean turf the walls rise, grey, time-ravaged, beautiful ; pierced by arch and window space and with great gaps and broken lines where parts have paid the penalty of age. Not even the great undamaged Church could be more beautiful, more impressive than these fragments, carpeted with turf and with great trees to fill the gaps that time and the violence of man have made.

Grey are the walls but never colourless, for lichen and moss with blossoming marjoram and wallflowers splash quiet and vivid hues across the wall-face from every ledge and archway. And surely no Church ever had a more fitting roof than the great canopy of heaven itself.

This Abbey is a place to muse in, where feeling may well usurp the use of thought. But there is detail here in the Chapel of St. Mary which even the highest of sky-dreamers should come down to earth to look at. Transitional work is this, between the Norman and the Gothic and the care lavished on each detail, the perfect harmony and grace of it, the wonderful detail of the round arched Norman porch, these speak of a type of art that meant hard work, hard thinking and patience that is content to leave to the following generations the fulfilment of the task.

Let us leave such thoughts of art and periods and in the deep, hushed peace that falls around the ruins as the sun declines let us remember those who have stood here,

have knelt here in the days now misty with the time between. Here came King Arthur pattern true-knight, here came his bride to him and here they rest even now. Lancelot, Galahad, and brave Sir Beverdere and all that gallant company have trod the ground which now we tread. And Merlin cast his spells about the place before these great stone walls were raised—while Avalon's church was a wattle hut, before the name Christian was known where Winchester and York now stand.

For Weary-all Hill, that long whale-backed hill with its one dark patch of trees which lies from Glastonbury out to Street, was the first landing place of the missionary St. Joseph and his helpers when they came to spread their news on English soil. Avalon was an isle then, as its name tells, an isle amidst the turning and lake-like spreading of the Brue, up which a boat might sail from the sea right to the Tor itself.

Here on Weary-all was the mystic Thorn tree, grown from St. Joseph's staff as he leant on it in prayer, a tree which burst into blossom every year at Christmastide no matter how severe the weather. There still exists a descendant of this tree, which has been seen in blossom on Christmas day, or so at least the story runs.

It seems strange to come to the Tor so near the end of a sketch of Glastonbury, this is indeed a reversal of the actual. For whether you go by road or footpath, whatever direction you approach from, the Tor is your first clearest and most lasting impression. A perfect cone-shaped hill, round-topped, crowned with the tower of a dismantled church. Standing like a gigantic anthill out of the low-lying marshlands that surround it ; a hill not large but with a character as fixed and individual as that of Snowdon, clothed to the top with close firm turf clear cut in outline, yet surrounded with a haze of mystery romance and folk lore that have been gathering here since the distant day when St. Joseph buried at its foot the Holy Grail.

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The Tribunal, Glastonbury

The Abbot's Barn, near Glastonbury

From the top of this miniature mountain that served as compass to the first Christians who came to lighten England you see a great prospect spread on every side, not wide as mountain views may be but full of interest and quiet beauty.

The red and slate of Glastonbury roofs strike a homely if incongruous note. Beyond and over them the corn land pasturage and peat moors stretch back for many miles, right to the flats of Berrow and the curve of the distant bay. Flat land it is, with only Brent Knoll standing out, hump-shaped, from the plain. The long dark line of Mendip's face stretches out from nearby Wells, towards the sea. And on the other hand Weary-all, mixing with the gentle Poldens marks the boundary of the old sea marshes, while behind these are more marshes, known to history as Sedgemoor.

From this eminence you may survey the old lake and river beds and see how even now Avalon would be an isle were the sea raised only a few feet. An isle not of the sea itself, but of the marshes and the creeks.

Flat lands are only too often uninteresting, but it is not so with these moors of Somerset. Maybe the interest would pall in time, but to the hillsman there is a charm about the long unvaried tree-lined roads, the gentle undulated fields of corn and pastures and something attractive even in the peat and turf mines, if we may call "mines" these wide and shallow ditches cut across and across the water-logged fields which once were swamps; cutting out blocks of hard turf or of harder peat to serve as fuel,—adding further joy to the Somerset homesteads because of the clear blue smoke. A little industry is this and yet a great one, as you will realise when passing by mile after mile of fields cut and crossed with ditches where the soil has gone and the stagnant brackish water oozes up.

The trees are many on the plains, singly and in groups but rarely great woods. They are sturdy rather than fine

and seem to speak, with the farms and villages, of a hard life of reclaiming waste land. For it is always toil and often vain to try to alter Nature's plans.

There are many hamlets and groups of houses scattered about the moors, but only one village of real magnitude. Wedmore, a place of history. It was in this grey stone village, set on rising ground amid the low lands, that Alfred made treaty with the invader Guthrum ; and to the same spot the Dane returned after his baptism into the Christian faith.

Wedmore, as it stands to-day—one cannot call it modern Wedmore—is typical of lowland Somerset. The unvarying yet ever varied grey stone, grey walls, and twisting streets, pure yesterday with never a jarring note of modern rush. The Church is old and of some interest, with a gallery over the porch, a Jacobean pulpit, and last, but not least, its central tower, a feature not uncommon hereabouts, but more rarely met with in other districts.

Wedmore stands with one foot on the low land and one on the end of a little range of hills which rise hereabouts and run for a few miles parallel with the Mendips—gaining an exaggerated importance from the low land which surrounds them. There are some fine old hamlets here, Wear and Chapel Allerton are two, and from the ridge of the hills you get the finest of all the distant views of the Mendips and of Cheddar Gorge, which is just opposite.

" Down over " from Wedmore, hard by Godney on the Glastonbury Road has been discovered a village of a very different type. A village of the Lake Dwellers, those long-forgotten men of whom the antiquarian tells us so much yet of whom we know so little. A village it seems built upon stakes and piles driven deep into what is now grass land but then was a shallow reed-studded lake. Much of interest from these strange dwellings is now housed in the museum at Glastonbury. Perhaps the

Wedmore

Athelney

most human relic is the boat, built with a craft which compels admiration for those who wrought it so without a single tool, as we know tools, and perhaps a still greater admiration for those who dared to travel in the queer ungainly thing.

What a picture it must have been to see this long low craft with four dim figures in it creeping back over shallow swamp and deep black river in the cold blue moonlight which cut clear naked silhouettes of standing sedge and drooping willow. Back to where like great stilt-supported beehives, the homesteads of the village stood still and glistening ; the cold light shining on their close-packed thatch, lost in the vague loose-woven sides.

One wonders what manner of men these were ! What thoughts were theirs ? What hopes ? What fears ? Yet since they were men, since they had built these homes had laboured for them and now are dead, we need not wonder, for they were human, and human nature does not vastly change.

The flora and the bird life of the low lands are a continual surprise and mystery to the hillsman. Here and here only grows the flowering fern and there are other strange and rare plants, Bog Myrtle, Orchids, and the rest.

And there are birds here also that never haunt the uplands. Waders and Sedge-birds, strange birds of passage when the wind is high. The Lesser Redpole, the Snow Bunting and the Hawfinch you may see here, the Warblers—Reed, Marsh and Grasshopper—and others without number. If you are fortunate you may come to know them but only by patience and long stillness. For of all birds marsh-birds seem least to love the human race, least able to discern the difference between those twin agents of destruction—small boys and hunters of specimens—and the true Nature lover who covets not their bodies but their friendships.

Chapter VI.

# HILL-LAND AND MARSHES.

IT is interesting to notice what an influence the surrounding country has on our appreciation of Nature's works. Proportion is everything; especially is this so in the case of hills. Mountainous Dunkery fenced round by many wild hilltops scarcely less lofty than itself, is rather a part of the moor than an individual hill. While little Glastonbury Tor which is hardly one-third as high rises imposingly from the surrounding plains, a landmark for many a mile.

So it is with the Poldens, that string of hillets running from Street to out by Cossington. In undulating country they would be lost, but bounded as they are by Brue Level and the flats of Burtle Heath on the one side and on the other by the marsh lands of Kings-Sedge and Sedge-moor, they attain to the importance of a range and watershed. And though they have no claim to grandeur, no pretensions to romantic beauty, yet they have a charm which cannot be denied for those who love the quiet and peace of an English countryside.

Here is a country of grass land and orchards; a land of quiet lanes, leading to be-drowsed farms where deep-eyed, glossy cattle stand contemplative in the shade, quiet and motionless save for head shake or switching of tail to disturb the tickling flies; a

land of woods and thickets, studded with diamond anemone and sapphire hyacinth with delicate white mauve-veined wood-sorrel lurking among its shamrock leaves, followed by foxglove and bracken and the tints of turning bramble. Field paths and stiles are here, leading through ripening corn rustling with every vagrant puff of air, or through luscious knee-high meadow grass sprinkled with yellow gems of buttercups. And all around is the quiet softness of the tree-studded, gently-swelling hills. A road runs right along the ridgeway of the Poldens, a pleasant undulating upland road never quite straight or level, from which you see wide sweeps of country away on either hand. With its quiet falling to the plains, broad grassy borders to the road and scattered woods, it has something about it reminiscent of the Hog's Back, a Hog's Back less imposing perhaps but less spoilt by the works of man.

There are nowhere else such orchards as those in the Polden country. With the tall grass, later scythe-mown for hay, between the long lines of rough-barked twisted trunks, snowed under a froth of airy pink and white or almost breaking beneath the weight of their red and golden harvest, they seem so natural, so part and parcel of the countryside that they do not strike you as of man's planting, it is as if it was Nature's plan to have them so.

Down among the apple orchards and the pastures are English villages, snug flower-bowered homes of broadest Somerset, where the only times of day are sunrise, high noon, and sundown, where the only time of week is Sunday, and the seasons are marked by sowing and reaping. We wonder from where these hamlets got their names, Catcot and Cossington, Moorlinch and Bawdrip. Maybe the etymologist could tell us, but the etymologist is an unpoetic fellow as a rule. Far better it would be to trace these names back ourselves through the legend history and folk lore of the villagers.

Some one would find with ease. Woolavington suggests at once the days when Somerset produced good broadcloth: but why Puriton? Why Shapwick?

If the Poldens themselves are somewhat characterless their outposts in the plains are certainly not. Ball Hill hard by the village of Stawell is a smooth shapely rise where one may sit for hours and watch cloud shadows chasing across the marsh lands. And there is Knowle Hill, repeated name, with a tower to crown its rounded head, mistaken often by those who see it first for the greater and more historic Tor of Glastonbury.

Away from Polden, over those fields of Sedgemoor, which have forgotten their bloody history and only tell of fine crops and well-fed cattle, there lies a little village whose place in English history is assured though its existence to-day may be forgotten. For in the parish boundaries of Lyng stand the few cottages that are Athelney, where great King Alfred sheltered and humanlike burnt the cakes. This story is treasured by us all because it is so human and so homely.

Even in these days an invading army would wish to leave Athelney alone, and before the days of metalled roads it must indeed have been a refuge and a fastness in the marshes, where those who knew and loved the country could withdraw in safety; to plan, to muster their forces and at last to issue forth by many paths across the soft lands and drive the alien from the sacred shore.

A strange land this, flat marshy meadows, damp in the driest times, where fine corn and rich grasses mature in the burning earthy summer heat. Few trees are here save for the willows and the sun beats down continually drawing the moisture from the earth and giving a humid *growing* tang to the still air. Thus in the summer. When winter brings mist, rain or sleet, the firmest roads are soft to the foot, and the haze of moisture cuts close the view over the pearl-laden meadows and along the

Somerset Withy Marshes

Portishead

full black ditches. Here at Athelney are osier beds, wide cultivated marsh pools, shallow and brackish where at the harvest time thick forests of head-high reeds, straight, stiff and close packed, stand yellow in the sunlight ready to be cut and sheaved, for the thatchers of barns and the weavers of baskets; relict of perhaps man's oldest industry, for before he took to farming while he yet lived on the fish he could catch, with what green stuff unaided Nature gave him even so long ago he thatched his house with osier reeds.

Not all the marsh is desolate; there are willow-fringed lakes within its borders where cattle come down from the meadows to drink and stand knee-deep in the placid sky-tinged pool. There are lanes between giant elms, thickets where song-birds build and all life sings in tune with them.

Across the flat lands from Athelney it is but a step to Langport town, where the leisurely river flows under a bridge much prized by the townsfolk. A tiny town is this, but long along the highway: its one stretched street a collection of odds and ends of houses, red brick and stone, quaint and pretentious, no two alike in shape or size.

Langport stands on rising ground and this, aided perhaps by the possession of two railway stations, enables its inhabitants to look down upon the lesser villages. These things Langport knows and is proud of, also the little Chapel spanning the high road; and the memory of two Members sent to Parliament still lingers. Yet the one thing that will save Langport from oblivion has faded. Here was born, here worked, here is now almost forgotten Walter Bagehot shrewdest kindliest yet keenest critic of men, of books and other works of men.

Langport remains the type of that charming, important yet half-forgotten thing the country town. Simply to call it *a* country town, however, is to do less than justice to Langport, it is more than that—it is *West* Country.

Chapter VII.

# THE SEA COAST.

OF the fallacies which are sown so thick in this wonderful, complex language of ours, there is hardly one so common and yet so mistaken as that which attaches to the word "beauty" a significance no greater than the superlative of "prettiness."

In actual fact beauty and prettiness have but little in common. A beautiful view is rarely "pretty" in the accepted sense and certainly a pretty view is rarely beautiful. Beauty seems to suggest a larger canvas and yet it is not a distinction of size. Rather it is a difference in treatment, to borrow an expression from the painter. Prettiness deals with detail and dainty colouring; beauty with broad washes and the sweep of lines. In short, prettiness is usually complex, while beauty is always simple.

Nature has scarcely given us one pretty spot in all the long stretch of sea coast which lies westward from Portishead to where the slow, smooth Parrett brings down its tribute to the Severn Sea. But there is beauty in every mile of it. First the beauty of open downland, cliff-footed, wooded in the hollows sun-browned above; the beauty of little promontories, rocky and bare or hiding their shapes beneath a canopy of wind-swept trees and underbush; and down the channel is the superlative beauty of the sea flats—great stretches of glistening shore ribbed with the long dark lines of wandering creeks, where at sundown the whole world, land and water, swims into a mist of gold backed by the changing glory of the sky—transparent red, flecked with clouds

Clevedon

Kewstoke Woods, near Weston-super-Mare

black in their bulk, gold-tinged toward their edges and silver and pearl pink where detached whiffs float listlessly across the great clear dome in the still evening air.

There is no land where one can see such sunsets as in the flats. And here the going down is perfected because the sun sinks not into fields or into the smoke of factories but into the " broad water of the West " itself, or behind that clear-cut mysterious ridge of transparent purple which is Exmoor.

Portishead is a townlet leading a double life. It is a port and if local gossips know (and who should know better ?), the finest port of the West ; with a harbour for ever sheltered, great storehouses and a brand new Naval College. And at the same time it contrives to be quite one of the most charming of pleasure resorts. It may well be that the old stone harbour and the coming and going of ships for foreign lands help in lending to Portishead its share of the spirit of romance which should be felt at every seaside haunt.

To understand the charm of Portishead you need but to see its situation, perched below and on the lower slopes of rolling downs with the neat grey-walled harbour before it backed by a dark, tree-clad headland ; truly a harbour where the ships of old romance might still drop anchor.

The Church—imposing to outward view—and the older portion of the town are further seaward than the now main streets ; not towards the harbour, where the life of Portishead lies, but across the neck of Woodhill almost to Woodhill Bay.

Down channel from Woodhill Bay the coast is full of beauty ; not magnificent as the Exmoor coast is but infinite in its variety of form and colour, with the downs, the flats, woods, and the cliffs taking turn and turn to guard the tidal shore. Never quite straight, never quite of an even height or a definite slope back from the sea, one cannot really know this country till one has footed

every mile of it, for each bay and each miniature headland has a picturesqueness of its own.

While there is no street in Walton-in-Gordano half so long as its name, this little village is typical of much of the country hereabouts. The situation is more than picturesque, it is strikingly individual and yet in its main features so ordinary that any word picture of it needs must fail. It is just in this telling of common things arranged in an uncommon way that the pen of the writer must fall behind the painter's brush, unless the writer be a genius.

A few miles west from here lies Clevedon, and Clevedon, or a part of it, has been immortalised in word pictures that no painter can excel. The modern Clevedon is all that a seaside town of modest mind should be. With its sea-washed promenade, its green lawn beach and sheltered bathing bay, separated each from each by tiny rocky headlands, it forms a pleasant retreat indeed for those who wish for the music of the waves mixed with the music of an orchestra and prefer man-made seats to those of Nature's fashioning. At the seaside the shore's the thing and at the shore Clevedon excels.

But it is not by the rock-footed promenade or by the green lawn sea-shore that the charm of Clevedon is felt most strongly. That will you find on the sea-bound Downs to westward, where amid close turf and grey stone walls Clevedon Old Church rests in a little hollow almost at the cliff edge, beautiful itself and in its clean, wind-swept surroundings. It is a low, square-towered church, with well marked plan of nave and transept, surrounded at a distance by a little grey stone wall, enclosing God's Acre and its ancient year-worn yew. And here is buried Arthur Hallam, he who, dying, found that immortal fame which life, for all his genius, might have withheld from him.

" In Memoriam " is above criticism of such a sketch as this. The poem as a poem or as a philosophy of life, we

Weston-super-Mare

Weston-super-Mare, Madeira Cove

may appreciate wherever read, but it is here that the wonder of its picture-painting strikes deepest home.

To go to Clevedon for the first time is to add one hundred-fold to the deep beauty of " In Memoriam," for it seems to draw you into the spirit of the poem.

What better memorial could Clevedon have.

> There twice a day the Severn fills,
> The salt sea water passes by,
> And hushes half the babbling Wye
> And makes a silence in the hills.

Away from Clevedon and the downs, still westward : by wooded coves and bare grey cliffs ; over the sea channel of Yeo river ; around the tiny bay at Woodspring and out to Sand Point the coast maintains its characteristic of being alike in no two places ! There are more woods here than at Clevedon and even at low tide the sea is close inshore. Little cliffs, grey, brown or dusky ; wooded slopes to the water's edge ; rock beaches and the downs all take their share in forming the barriers of the land. You feel that no barriers are needed here, so calm is it normally, so far from the open sea. But wait till the south-west wind comes tearing up the channel driving the mad Atlantic waves before and you will understand the need of them. Round in the next bay, a wood-backed sweep of low flat shore, stands Kewstoke a village pretty in a scattered grey Somerset fashion, with a well set Church the history of which goes back to Norman days. And beyond Kewstoke, reached by the coast road or through the woods that clothe Worlebury Hill and hide its ancient camp, is Weston-super-Mare. One of Weston's best approaches is this way over Worlebury, whence is obtained a noble view of the sea and of the Welsh mountains beyond it.

One must admit and admire the faith and energy of the townsfolk of Weston, for they have worked wonders with the sea front—transforming a waste of mud flat and green slimed rock into a paradise of colour. It is a

wonderful transformation thoughtfully planned—a scheme which harmonises with the verdure of the hills at the back of Weston. The delightful series of rock walks and rock gardens, clothed with flowering plants, some of which bloom the whole winter through : the gradation of the esplanades : the utilisation of rock and stone which for untold centuries has stood on the estuary bank : all this has all been skilfully achieved, so that at high tide Weston has a distinctive air of its own, a true prettiness. A drabness so characteristic of some estuaries of larger rivers has given place to a certain beauty here—artificial, but cunningly wrought to disguise the hand of man. A fitting atmosphere has been created for the many who make Weston their playground every Summer. And people are beginning to find that Weston is attractive in the Winter too, it is so sheltered.

From the shore or the pier or from the high ground behind Weston, Brean Down is the first feature of the seascape to attract attention, and the one on which we can look with greatest pleasure, for Brean Down is beautiful. A narrow down-clad promontory a mile long, well worth the trouble of reaching from Weston, which is saying not a little, for between flows the leisurely Axe down a wide mud-banked estuary. Brean is a land of wind—sea-borne breeze and tearing hurricane. No tree scarcely a bush breaks the fine curve of the turf-clad down. The cliffs are dark, sheer and overhanging and the downs too show signs of Nature's sterner moods. And yet bare and barren as they seem, these same downs shelter many rare flowers and are a resting place for birds found nowhere else in England ; for Brean seems to be a calling place for the bird of passage and a sanctuary for feathered sea folk and strange winged travellers blown far from their courses by the wind from the unknown places.

So Brean is a stronghold of Nature even yet ; as it was in the day when Rome's great Empire used it as a colossal quay where her ships might lie sheltered for their loading.

Burnham-on-Sea

Cornhill, Bridgwater

There are still traces of a Roman road here and earthworks which may belong to years yet further past.

Further west the coast falls back ceasing almost to be a coast, becoming only a line above which the water is too tired or too indolent to rise. You may look inland from the sea and scarcely see the shore as higher than the water. The sunken Berrow flats are scarcely lower than the inland Burnham Level, and Huntspill level with its corn land is but a few feet above the submerged Stert mud banks.

A land of glimmering pools, full of strange sea folk ; of reed and marsh ; of sea air rustling the full-eared corn, for the corn land comes down almost to the water's edge. And in the waters marvellous tints of gold at the going down of the sun. Near here the river Parrett and its smaller companion the Brue enters the sea.

It is here that Burnham is, with its light-house, tall and dignified but some distance from the sea. It is a place with many attractions, especially for those who take their holidays *en famille*. There is a promenade at Burnham, there are houses and shops and an old Church which is a most attractive building. The altar piece, originally designed by Inigo Jones for the private chapel at Whitehall Palace, stood in Westminster Abbey until the coronation of George IV. when it was given to a former vicar of Burnham.

Inland from Burnham Brent Knoll rears its 450 feet of tree-crowned height, like a gigantic heat-bump in the levels. A fine hill is this with its woods and steep grass slopes, very different from the flat surrounding country—a country flat as the Lincoln flats and yet with a charm ; full of colour in blossom time and harvest ; with deep reed-covered ditches behind the willow-hedges ; orchard and corn land, and much rich pasture where, in the shade of straight stately elms, sleepy red cattle feed and ruminate.

Across on Huntspill level they still talk of the great

floods of the last century when the sea in its anger came sweeping over the land, washing away homestead and barn as so much driftwood : covering village streets and fields alike and making the river nothing but a deeper path in the surging, wind-driven lake.

Breaking the monotony of these hilless stretches the Parrett comes down to the sea through a misty barely-shaped vale, the ghost of a depression in the landscape ; a vale of blue and grey in the misty rain or sea fog, red-brown where the sun strikes the rich earth. A slow and commonplace river you might say, but it can show what few of England's rivers can, a bore sweeping up the channel at the turn of every tide.

And slow though the Parrett may be, it has seen life in the days gone by ; for its town is Bridgwater, and Bridgwater is a town of history, notable even in the West where every hamlet is historic.

You would never guess that this solid, sunny, happy little town had ever been other than what we see to-day. A clean and charming town with a market, interesting old streets and an air of taking life easy that you find nowhere outside the West country. Yet it was Bridgwater which, during the Great Rebellion, upheld the Royalists' cause most nobly, and at the last shattered their hopes by its surrender. And here Monmouth and his mad-brained gallants made their headquarters before they sallied out to find death and disaster on Sedgemoor.

These things are long forgotten in the land that cradled them ; only one recollection of the past does Bridgwater still hold. It was the birthplace of Blake, Admiral and maker of sea history. His statue you may see and the house where first he saw the light, these are to Bridgwater alone ; but his spirit, rash, indomitable, full of the salt and savour of life, lives yet in every town and village where Englishmen hear the old call of the sea.

## Chapter VIII.

# THE HILLS BEHIND.

FROM Crooks Peak, or indeed from any view point along the Mendip range you will see the great plain of Somerset ringed round by hills, except to the north where flows the broad water of the Severn sea. Among the least known and most unspoiled of these guardian hills are those to the South West of the plain—the Blackdowns and their outposts. Here is a country unspoiled by the motorist, undiscovered by the tripper. It is a land of fine views and finer air, of hills clothed with high woods, of broad rich valleys. And it holds a number of delightful little towns.

Should you wish to see the whole of this delightful district you might well set out from Somerton—which stands on the south-east corner of the Poldens, from there following a series of broken ranges right round to the foothills of Exmoor. You will pass through Ilchester and Martock to Chard, then along the Blackdowns proper to Wellington and from there by a very up-and-down road to Wiveliscombe. And though you will see no place of world-wide fame, no celebrated beauty spot, no great Cathedral, you will find much to linger over and to love, both of Nature's handiwork and of man's.

Somerton is the name town of Somerset. It is set in an utterly unspoiled country of hill and dale. Like so many of the Somerset market towns it belies its great antiquity by its clean freshness. The town hall is fine and so is the group of old houses near it but the market cross is disappointingly modern. It would be fitting if this were replaced by a cross or other monument to that ancient tribe the Sumer-saetas from whom both town and county derived their names.

Your road to Chard leads you through Ilchester. An important town in Roman days and famous later as the birthplace of Roger Bacon—there its history and its development stopped. Next is Martock, a larger, more prosperous and much more picturesque place. Martock is clean and charming and it has quite one of the finest churches in the county.

Hereabouts are lanes which lead to Muchelney and lovely lanes they are. Muchelney is known to every student of domestic architecture but to too few other folk. It is only a village but nearly every cottage is a gem, with wonderful mullioned windows. Muchelney must have been built by great craftsmen. There are the remains of an abbey, and several larger houses of beauty equal to the cottages. The craftsmanship which makes this village unique goes down to the smallest detail of window latch, door knocker and lock.

Chard is a big town, as towns are reckoned in this part of the world, but it is clean and neat and charming. It may claim with truth to be seated astride the backbone of the West, for the rivulets which run from its streets in time of rain go different ways, one to the Severn sea and the other to the English Channel. There is not a great deal of history at Chard but it is a handsome little town and its perch on the hillside and hill top makes it handsomer still. Its main street is wide and forms a fine picture as it climbs the hill.

The Blackdowns are a range of hills vastly underrated. It may be because they are almost unknown. But they offer fine views, great wildness and a quiet which it is hard to equal even on the wastes of Exmoor. There is a good deal of wood and underbush on them, some heathy land and fine stretches of pine and heather. Always just below you are farms and orchards, but though you may sit and watch the ploughing and sowing and reaping there is a sense of great remoteness on the heights. Only one road crosses the Blackdowns, that from

Wellington Monument

Taunton

Taunton to Honiton and even that runs over only an outpost of the range. The natural character of the hills is broken only in one place, where the Wellington Monument soars skyward in memory of Britain's greatest soldier.

The view from the foot of the monument is fine enough, that at the top of the long and toilsome stairway is finer still. You seem to have the whole West Country laid at your feet. The tower, though perfectly safe seems to sway with every gust of wind. Wellington village is a couple of miles away, down in the valley. It is a big village, no doubt a town to its inhabitants. Whatever you may call it it is a bright and friendly place. From here to Milverton the road is a delight, never level and never straight and most charmingly wooded. Milverton is a warm and welcoming village, and but a few miles further on is Wiveliscombe.

Wiveliscombe is just such a place as its name would lead you to expect. That is to say it is long and straggling and altogether charming. It lies on the outskirts of Exmoor and has much of the character of an Exmoor village. Its cottages are white fronted and gay with flowers, its streets, or rather its *street* for it has but one, is wide and airy. Wiveliscombe seems to breathe that content with life that has been lost everywhere but in the West Country. Its people may not be rich but if appearance may be trusted they are comfortable and find life easy—and that perhaps is better!

The village is on the very fringe of Exmoor and from it you may discover some of the most glorious country of the west. There is no barren desolation here but deep wooded vales, here and there meadows and orchards and on the hill tops groups of pines growing straight and shapely from the heather. The railway line—and the road which follows it closely—from here to Barnstaple is fascinating in the variety and beauty of the country that it passes through. But much of that is in Devon, which is another story!

Chapter IX.

# TAUNTON DENE.

IF it were possible for an understanding traveller to journey through Somerset without coming to its county town, if he learned to know its highways and byways its wild moors and fertile plains and if at the end of his journey he was asked what kind of town the capital of such a county should be, he would describe a town very like Taunton.

For Taunton is purely Somerset. It is the county town and a place of high antiquity, but to-day—and you feel it has been so throughout its history—it is essentially a *country* town. There is hardly a street in it which does not lead you almost directly out to the fields and nowhere do you lose the sense of airiness and light and the sight of the sky, for Taunton's streets are wide and leisurely, and the houses—though substantial and dignified—are low built and comfortable. You never feel shut in and oppressed by bricks and mortar in Taunton.

The lay-out of the town is almost Roman, but not quite. It is as if the Romans had a hand in it but had to alter their usual regular design to fit in with an existing township. This may have been so, for Taunton is undoubtedly very old. It has had a chequered history, plentifully sprinkled with sieges for it was always an important point in any military campaign in the West country. But though it has a number of really interesting relics of the past to show, it is not a place where history grows oppressive! There is not a great deal of the Castle left, but what there is—mostly remarkably massive walls—is interesting. So is the museum. But there has been too much fire and ravine and sudden assault in

Taunton Castle

A meet of the Quantock Stag Hounds

Taunton's history for us to expect many really old buildings to have survived. What the town may have lost in antiquarian interest it has certainly gained in light and cleanliness.

The finest building in the town is set right at the end of an unprepossessing little street running off the market place. St. Mary Magdalen is one of the most striking churches of the West. Its great red-sandstone tower fills the end of the little street and soars above it with indescribable grace and grandeur. It is one of the most perfect towers in Somerset and it comes as a surprise to learn that it was completely rebuilt—faithfully reproducing a tower that had become unsafe—only some eighty years ago, that is at a period when in less fortunate parts of the country many lovely churches were being stripped of their interest and beauty by vandalistic " restorers " who had neither the sympathy nor the knowledge necessary for their admittedly difficult task.

Inside St. Mary's is rich and full of warm shadows. A fine timbered roof and wide aisles give dignity to what would otherwise be almost too ornate. The church is in the Perpendicular style and is an excellent example of that mid-Gothic period. There are two other churches worth visiting, St. John's a modern building designed by Sir Gilbert Scott and, for contrast, St. James—which is old and has a fine tower.

The market place you cannot well miss and certainly will not wish to. The bridge at the end of North Street is not particularly fine, but it is interesting and gives you a view of the river—very leisurely, like so much of Taunton. There is a good park where the gardens blaze with colour throughout the summer ; and last but not least there is the County cricket ground, known all over England as a batsman's paradise.

It will not do to describe Taunton town without describing its setting, for that is a part, and a very important part, of its charm. It is set in the centre of the

rich wide fertile vale known to history as Taunton Dene.

Many a person who has never seen Taunton's towers across the meadow land has heard of Taunton Dene, and of bold Richard thereof who went to woo :

> " Last New Year's day, as I'v heard say
> " Young Richard he mounted his dapple grey
> " And trotted along from Taunton Dene
> " To court the parson's daughter Jean."

—although he had to admit to a total income of ninepence per day, on which account the prudent Jean refused him !

You need not wonder at Richard's forwardness, for that delightful old parson and writer Thomas Fuller tells us that the vale of Taunton :

> " is so fruitfull, to use their own phrase, with the *zun* and *zoil* alone that it needs no manuring. The peasantry therein are as rude as rich, and so highly conceited of their own country that they consider it a disparagement to be born in any other place."

The vale is broad and long. It is hedged round by hills, the Quantocks and the outposts of Exmoor to north and west, the Blackdowns to south and east. It is superlatively rich, as old Fuller pointed out and it is also superlatively beautiful in a quiet, essentially English way. Its beauty is that of rich meadow land, tall swaying willows, and roadways winding along between deep sedge-filled ditches.

There is no town in the dene, save Taunton, unless indeed you count Langpark which is right at the eastern end of it, and few large villages, but there are many snug hamlets, many groups of warm and homely farm houses with their attendant buildings. There are good roads winding over it with bridges over the rivers and foot-paths leading over plank bridges through the most drowsy sun-warmed meadows in the world. It is good to wander anywhere in Taunton Dene and to see the red roofs and the towers of the town, round which its life revolves, in the clear blue dimness of the evening light.

Chapter X.

# THE QUANTOCKS.

MUCH maligned is the local patriot; he is accused of narrow-mindedness, shunned as a bigot, avoided as a bore—yet surely he is a public benefactor. For if it were not for his missionary endeavours we might well miss a full half of those places most beautiful in our countryside, places about which guide books are silent, places where never yet the foot of tripper trod.

Even remembering the Cornishman who talks of "up in England" and the Dartmoor man who thinks the world is bounded by the outer ring of Tors, there can be no district in the country numbering more real lovers of its beauty among its inhabitants than the Quantock Hills. Very staunch and very fervid are the Quantock folk in their love of their home land. There is a softness, homeliness and beauty about these hills which every native feels and most try to pass on to whatsoever stranger strays their way. They are great lovers of their homeland.

One cannot wonder at it for the Quantock man is born in Nature's paradise. There are those who think that when the earth was made this little corner was reserved for all that was small and perfect. Colour too vivid for the great wastes of Exmoor was set here; shapes softer even than the soft South Downs; woodland dells, the only ones left to us in England where a common man may still see fairies; long tree-clad combes; rivers and streamlets a joy alike to eye and ear. And over it all the heather and the gorse moors and the rich moorland air.

The railroad from Taunton to Minehead runs close under the western slopes of Quantock and any of the little

stations along the line will serve well as a starting point for rambles into the wilds above. It is a part of the charm of these hills that they are small, half a day's march from end to end or an hour's tramp across ; with footpaths wandering up into the heart of them from every little village in the foothills. And once on the high moors you may journey as you will.

Quantock land is not a place to plan your walks on. Rather take the first track you find, follow it long as you will and then turn right or left as the spirit moves you, it matters not which track you take for there is beauty everywhere.

But there is one trackway which should be known to every Quantock pilgrim, the path running from end to end of the ridgeway of the hills, starting from the Bridgwater road on the hill above Bagborough and roving along the high backbone of the land until it dips seaward between the twin villages of Quantoxhead. Many things rare and beautiful you may see from this track. The peaks of Quantock—Cothelstone Beacon, Will's Neck and Danesborough, and the lesser heights of Lydeard, Thorncombe, Stowbarrow, Great Hill and Beacon Hill. And you will see the head of many a leafy combe, of moor-like ravines and of fairy glens tempting you off the hilltops. But you will be loath to leave the heights because of the distant views of the sweeping curve of the sea coast, of the great plain to eastward, bordered far off by the faint black wall of Mendip ; and westward rise and fall the haunting slopes of Exmoor, changing in colour, sweep, and texture with every changing hour or fugitive breath of the wind. Sometimes you can hardly spare a glance for all this, because of the fascination of the road itself, now in deep beech woods, now out on the warm bare moors, to plunge again into the fragrant half-light of a thick-leaved coppice of oak or thorn.

The combes of Quantock are small yet perfect, as befits their setting. There are Seven-Wells-Combe

The Quantock Hills

Holford Village

and Cockercombe, deep, leafy paradises which have a soft, insistent call for us on a baking summer day, and which, at other times, when the high wind drives the rain across the uplands, give shelter of another sort. Such combes as these make one long to forswear the life of cities and become a woodman or a forester, living 'twixt the green carpet and the great blue dome.

Or you may rove to Weacombe Combe, where the clear-cut moors and the pine trees meet, but do not mingle; where a rough track leads round below the wood and yet above the moorland valley, where loose grey stones lie half buried in grass and heather. Silence reigns here, save for the rare cry of a passing bird or a sighing wind among the pines. Very different is Holford Glen, authentic haunt of gnomes and fairies, where stream and vegetation mingle in a riot of colour—the dark brown, sober grey, and shining silver of the tree trunks forming a background to the feathered fern fronds and the soft, dazzling splashes of colour where the flowers grow thickest, close to the stream banks.

Most of the combes are sunk in the eastern wall of Quantock, for on this side is most of the warmth and shelter of the range. The western side is more bare, more sturdy, and more steep, as befits the face that Quantock shows to the great Atlantic gales; yet even here there is softness in the curve and sweep of the downs, while the hardy oak, and much scrub and underbush prevent the monotony of bare hills and cold. On the inland slopes, where the hills climb down to the valley where Taunton lies, there is much ploughed land, many hedges and fences, with here and there loose stone walls; so the rambler finds a more tame and quiet beauty here than on the more uncultivated slopes. But at the seaward end, the beauty is wild in its riot of colour, with the hills rising almost from the waters of the channel, a few red-roofed cottages buried in the luxuriant greenery below, and the great moor-hills sweeping down, purple

and gold, from the heights; with perhaps an old stone quarry by the roadside, filled to the brim with the vivid gold of gorse and the fairy green of the larch; or where the road is cut through a cliff the foxglove, pennywort, and ferns without number cover the scar, filling the cleft with living beauty.

Such is the Quantocks seaboard, a medley of bracken, oak trees, and scrub, growing with the glory of the flowers at their feet as in a natural garden on a hillside sweeping down to where its base rests almost in the sea. Much of the charm of these hills is in their perfect peace and solitude. Who ever remembered meeting here a tripper party? Such as do come here are fellow-pilgrims, searching for beauty, not for "lions." Indeed, Quantock has but few "sights" of the conventional type. There is a British camp on Danesborough, and some remains of an ancient chantry near Adscombe; and between the two villages of Quantoxhead, St. Audries, a perfect country house.

One might write for ever, with no other theme but the Quantock villages. They are so full of peace, so sleepy in their hollows in the foothills, that one fears to walk sharply down their quiet highways even at mid-day, lest the intrusion of ringing footsteps should break the spell which holds the secret of the drowsy bee-lulled air.

Tiny as Quantocks villages are, each has its own life, its own interests. And each has its "personality" too, just as large towns and cities have; but these things are too deep for the wanderer; all we may do is to note the larger, physical differences, such as the fact that at Kilve a brook runs down to the sea, and that Stringston's Church is red-roofed and bright. Only to those who live in them are the deeper underlying differences known.

But not all of her villages are so tiny. Crowcombe, for instance, boasts a very charming street with its predominance of thatch and stone over those modern atrocities of slates and brick. The Church here is

Watchet Harbour

Washford Village

perched on a high bank where the road runs round into a combe of oak and pine, where all day long the mists play up and down.

Up this road, over the backbone of the hills, and almost down on the plain beyond, lies Nether Stowey, rendered a place of pilgrimage because it was once the home of Coleridge. Little change has the passing of years wrought on the village street, with the cottage where the poet entertained Wordsworth and Southey, men who loved and sang the West Country. At the next name one hesitates—what did Hazlitt think of Stowey? With that clear, cold, satiric mind of his, one can hardly imagine him happy in this drowsy nook, sheltered from all but sleep; maybe he sighed for his own Winterslow, set in the open downs, where the sun and the wind and the crisp air give vigour to thought.

But if Hazlitt may have found Stowey a shade too somnolent, what of Lamb? Surely the immortal Elia forget even his beloved London here! For Elia loved the quaint and the picturesque, and Stowey is both of these. Farms are the fringe of Stowey, cottages the heart. It only misses the beautiful because there are no front gardens, and a village street without front gardens stands condemned, however large and prolific those at the back of the cottages may be.

## Chapter XI.

# WATCHET TO DUNSTER.

THERE seems to be some vast significance in the act of turning a corner; something of eternal hopefulness—some wayward scrap of high adventure still left to lighten our prosaic modern days. An existence of straight and limitless prospects would be dull indeed, for most of the good things in life are "round a corner." Indeed, we might say that the corners themselves are the best of it all, because it is ever true that "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive."

Among the twists and turnings of our English roads and railways there is hardly one so entirely delightful as that which the Great Western line takes way-out from Taunton. When the line has run along the western base of Quantocks it suddenly swerves westward along a sea coast track to Minehead. This is indeed the perfect corner, turning from beauty to beauty with infinite variety of line and colour, with infinite messages for those who seek them.

For variety of scene, spirit and air there is hardly a stretch of country in our homeland to compare with that which starts here, at this turn of the railroad and finishes way up in the moorhill outskirts of Exmoor. A different country greets you on every mile of the way, every type of valley every shape of hill each colour of the infinite variety which Nature paints with—all are here.

As eastward sentinel of all this lovely wonderland stands Watchet, a townlet deserving well the high honour that its situation gives it. Every pilgrim to the great beauties of the West—Dunster, Porlock and the

Moors—should come to them through Watchet, for Watchet forms a shelf whereon you may lay the cares of city life, taking in their stead something of the peace, the old-world quaintness which forms a full half of the charm of Exmoor land.

"Old-world quaintness" seems to sum up Watchet in a single phrase. With its fantastic walled harbour, sheltering some relic of the days of sail; with its uneven little homesteads clustered around the quayside, it forms a picture no beauty lover would pass quickly by. It has an air, too, has this tiny town, as befits one of the oldest of our English ports. For Watchet has stood through the days which now are history. Even before raiding Danes molested her she stood here; and in spite of the raids, which were many and fierce, she stands here still. There is reason to think that Watchet may have "got her own back" on the world for the many raids she suffered, for it was from such ports as this that our sea-fame sprang. Here were the homes of many of those who made our name a thing to hold and glory in. And the breed lives yet in those tall, loose-limbed blue-jerseyed figures on the quay. They seem to haunt the little harbour, searching subconsciously, maybe, for the old full-sailed barques which were their heritage, but which the steam-steel monsters have driven from the open sea to lie close-reefed, decaying, in some forgotten harbour where the ghosts of good ships take their rest.

Not that their occupation has gone, it has only changed and grown less romantic. Watchet is still a busy port—indeed her trade increases.

Down the coast from Watchet, a coast of low rocky cliffs, mud banks and rich brown Severn water, is Blue Anchor; a village which there is reason to fear will some day succeed in its obvious ambition of attracting visitors. Then will there be promenades cut in the little multi-coloured cliffs, cliffs veined and streaked with alabaster; there may even be a pier (forbid the thought!) to mar the

beauty of the bay-curve, jutting its ugly length out over the dark mystery of the submerged forest which is Blue Anchor's claim to fame. But all this is not yet, for up to now the village and the bay are unspoiled seaside-cum-rural England. Inland there are villages yet more beautiful, Washford, Williton and Carhampton, a trinity of rural gems, clean, airy, happy, flower-laden hamlets white and grey, thatched and tiled. Villages it is worth a year of city life to have a sight of.

Not far from Washford stands Cleeve Abbey, a wonderful monument to the Cistercian brotherhood who built it in " The Flowery Vale." St. Mary's in the Cliff, for so they named it, must have been a pleasant harbourage indeed ; set in the richest, greenest valley in all the countryside ; with wild red deer and trout close handy to break the monotony of a strictly monkish diet. The Church itself has vanished, hardly a trace of it remains ; but the monastic buildings still stand as fine an illustration of the domestic economy of the Cistercians as is left to us. The architectural student will revel in it, but not alone. For to the lover of the beautiful these old grey walls, filled in each nook and shelf with living colour, rising from softly vivid turf, backed by the majesty of stately trees, form a picture not soon forgotten.

But often you feel that those things, Watchet and the coast, the villages, even the glory of Cleeve Abbey—are but the prelude to the greater beauty which they precede, the beauty of Dunster. And here we must stay the pen a moment, for fear of too many words with but little meaning, for it is difficult to write in measured terms of this town-village, where all the most perfect beauty of the centuries is gathered up, preserved and consecrated.

The mile-long walk from the railway station to Dunster is along a shady field-fringed road, fragrant with meadowsweet. Then a few scattered cottages quaint beyond words, a sharp turn—and you stand at

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Cleeve Abbey

The Gateway, Cleeve Abbey

the head of Dunster street, most perfect street man ever gazed on.

Wide is Dunster town, very wide and the white dark-gabled cottages seem to have stood there since the world began, so natural are they in their two uneven rows, uneven because no two adjacent houses are alike in height or roof pitch, like only in whitened dark beamed front, dark tiled roof, lattice-paned windows and tiny gardens in the paving of the street. Straight is this broad street, high at the near end where stands the Yarn Market, a circular open barn perfect in designs and texture ; gently the street dips down and then sweeps to the foot of Castle Hill. Each line of every cottage leads the eye to Castle Hill where, rising from the woods which clothe it and form the background of the view stands the Castle—a white and stately miracle—strayed from a child's fairy dream.

Every cottage in this street might claim a chapter to itself, so varied and so perfect are they. Inside they more than fulfil the promise of their low-beamed entrance ways and quaint west country chimneys. Low are the rooms, with oaken beams polished by centuries of smoke and we will hope by the reflection of domestic peace to a glimmer which forms almost a halo. Steps up and steps down ; wide open hearths ; twisting passages and stairways and doors swinging on long hinges, old as history.

The Luttrell Arms, the big, square, ivy-covered inn at the head of the street, has the same glories as the cottages but on a more magnificent scale, with fine panelling and carving, a gabled roof and a garden beyond compare. This inn was once the private home of the that-time Abbot of Cleeve. Much has been said and written against the old monkish orders, but not even their most bitter traducers can dispute their taste.

Opposite the Inn, blocking a half of the wide roadway, is the Yarn Market, a building unique and beautiful,

an octagonal, many-beamed open shelter, with tapering roof and wide, overhanging eaves, lighted beside the open sides, by eight little dormer windows set in the tiled roof, with a lantern light to crown it. Grey, brown and dusky-red is this Market Place against the green background of the trees ; sometimes it seems enveloped in a mist of age when seen against the clear cut dark and light of the sunlit village street.

Looking back on it from the foot of Castle Hill the street presents as perfect a picture as before. Again a swelling tree-clad hill stands as the background, with an empty circular watch tower rising above the trees to counterfeit the Castle.

Dunster needs no praise to those who know it and no word picture can half convey its perfection to those who have not seen it, which is one of the many limitations of such a book as this. It is not in the main street only that Dunster excels ; in every byway, and there are many, there are cottages which make us wonder at their simple perfection. There is one fine house of a larger type, the three overhanging storeys of which make such a fine picture in Church Street. The Nunnery is the local name for this building but there is no record of it having served such a purpose as the name suggests.

Then there is the Church with its graceful square tower, its grey-walled graveyard and yews. Inside there are some most unusual shouldered arches and a fine oak screen. And in the outside of the old churchyard wall is a shallow recess where local tradition says the Dunster stocks once stood.

At the back of Castle Hill, down a stream-haunted woodland lane, is the Castle Mill ; a water-mill of great beauty, sheltered by the wooded hill, cut off by the stream from the broad tree-studded meadow lands of the park. Never was such play of sunshine as on these sun-splashed white walls when a breeze stirs the feather foliage of ash and birch to lazy whispering motion.

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Dunster

Minehead

And Dunster Bridge ; the old low, long-walled pack-bridge spanning the wide and shallow waterway, where sunshine and stones break the broad mirror of the stream into a thousand light-gleaming jewels ; where the pale green filtered sunrays strike cold against the warm brown boulders and the tree trunks. Here indeed you would be willing to sit for ever, and dream of what the world might be ; lulled by the music of the tinkling game played by the water and the pebbles.

The country around Dunster is a fit setting for the Queen Village, it is varied as the sky in May. Deep stream-laved valleys, dark with the shade of close-growing forest trees ; shallow, cup-like vales with meandering willow-fringed streamlets ; and ploughed land, where the wheat stands stiff and golden and the silver blue oats stir and quiver with every lazy breath of summer wind. And westward (we are ever drawn westward) is Grabbist —Grabbist, the outpost and the boundary of Exmoor ; boundary though it is, full to the core with Exmoor's wild romance. There is a stiff scramble up from Dunster, or you may take the inland Minehead road till Alcombe is reached, a clean little village almost lost among the trees. Here a hedge-side footpath leads up to the heights through clinging bramble, gorse and bracken ; with the moor air and the scent of thyme and heather to lure you ever forward up the steep ascent. Steep it is and rough, but Grabbist is worth it ; for once atop the ridge and you are in Exmoor—wild free beauty-laden Exmoor.

Glorious are the views from Grabbist's upper slopes ; of the curve of the channel waters, of distant Wales, of the soft outline of the Quantocks. And inland the hills of Exmoor wheel round from south to west. Lovely is the valley running inland from Grabbist up towards Wootton Courtney, a valley where tree-clad combes and steep, bare-sided hollows sweep down to the wooded bottom where runs the road. Across this valley, and

round behind Minehead—from here but a few red roofs among the trees—the hills stand, perfect in shape and in their colours surpassing all else upon this earth. Brighter colours many a land can show, but none such delicate transparent tints, blue, grey, violet, palest brown, orange and yellow, with pink—pink that rose petals might envy—nowhere but on Exmoor can you find them softened and made as delicate and full of harmony as beauty's self could wish, by the mists which play for ever on the slopes, wafted by wind or sunshine over the uplands and the valleys.

Chapter XII.

# THE GATE OF EXMOOR.

OF all the sudden changes in the coastline around our country there are few so dramatic and complete as that where Exmoor pushes her outposts to the sea. For many miles, right from the Quantock foothills, the sea has washed a flat sand-banked mud-fringed shore, where a mile inland is but a few feet above the level of the tide, and where the wind cuts clean over sea and land and scarcely knows the difference. There are low cliffs at Blue Anchor but they are low, and then the flat marsh wastes begin again.

Then suddenly, travelling westward one comes to the great bulk of North Hill, a gigantic mass of fir-clad moor rising a full thousand feet from the water's edge, backed on the landward side by the great waste of the hill, a stubborn barrier to wind and sea. A wild coast, as unlike the placid seaboard we have left as you can well imagine.

At this sudden junction of hill and plain and sea there stands the much-maligned little township of Minehead. Much-maligned, because it is so frequently accused of newness, which gives to those who do not know it a very wrong impression, because Minehead is very old and remains to-day a pleasant little town for the seeker after quiet. As to modernity, Minehead was mentioned in Domesday Book and her history goes back before the Conquest ; while she retains in Quay Town and in the little cluster of old buildings around the Church much that is of real antiquity.

Simply as a seaside resort there is much to be said for Minehead. A well-curved bay, backed by the dark

green bulk of North Hill ; the grass-lawned front shaded by some splendid elms, a leafy avenue to lead to the pleasant town with its neat streets, bright shops and general air of quiet prosperity.

It is a pleasant place but there is more in it than that, for it abounds with pictures—not in the main streets perhaps but in the byways where bits of old Somerset still linger. Of these pictures none remains a more vivid or more pleasant memory than that of "Quay Town," a cluster of ancient cottages grouped at the foot and on the lower slopes of North Hill, vividly white and cream against the dark green background of the Firs, and sending, each of them, a spiral of clear blue peat smoke upward.

And there is quaintness and beauty in "High Town," the oldest part of Minehead. Grouped around the magnificent old Church are cottages of true West Country type, with thatch, long chimneys and clean, whitewashed fronts. Between the cottages leads a wide pathway, set with shallow steps because it is so steep, up to the Church—Minehead's proudest possession. This building would be impressive anywhere but is doubly so here, perched high on the hillside looking out over the sea and landward over the sea—flats and meadows to the rounded barrier of the Quantocks. So fine are the views from the Churchyard here that you will be loath to go inside, but not to do so is to miss a fine interior, with a carved oak screen like that at Dunster.

Beyond the Church is a path which will take you up on to the open of North Hill, a real moor-hill unfenced and unconfined, the glory of Minehead. From this hill are views of surpassing beauty ; over the Channel to Wales, inland to Dunkery and the moors, and eastward right across the Quantocks, over the great plain even to distant Mendip.

On the rounded butt-end which it presents to the flat lands and to Minehead North Hill is fir-clad. But soon

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Selworthy

Allerford

you are through this and on the open hillside. On the seaward slope is a farm with hedges and pasturage—and then the moors.

From Burgundy Combe, just beyond this, it is a fine walk to cut right across the moors to Selworthy Beacon, the highest point on this long ridge of hills and a place worthy of as great a name as Dunkery, were it only for the view it affords. But there is more than a magnificent view at Selworthy. There are the woods wherein you may find an ancient British fortress and a little lower down the southward slope of the hill is Selworthy itself.

Selworthy is unique, a sanctuary rather than a village ; these seven old cottages around a tree-guarded lawn are indescribable in their beauty of deep thatch and creeper. Wonderful deep porches with seats under the sheltering eaves, thatched dormer windows so quaintly set as to match the wonders of the rambling chimneys. And the purpose is as beautiful as the place itself, for it is a haven to which the old folk of a great estate can retire when their working days are done.

Across the road from the green is Selworthy Church, one of the most beautiful—as it is certainly the most finely situated—in all Somerset. A golden brown square-towered building, begun in Saxon days ; with a fine wooden roof inside and clustered pillars and much beauty of light and shade. From the churchyard is one of the finest views ever given for man's delight, of deep valleys and high moors and all that lies between. You may even when the trees are not too thick, catch a glimpse of the little square tower of Luccombe across the valley —the perfect village nestling under the great bulk of Dunkery.

Tiny is Luccombe, a church, a school and perhaps a dozen cottages, but delightful in every part. The church is small and grey but very stately ; there is a tall dark row of cypresses in the churchyard and a great yew. Everywhere about the village is soft colour of

laburnum and clematis and all the sweet old flowers, mingling with the thatch and the grey walls and cream.

From Luccombe is the best ascent to Dunkery, starting up a stony, water-worn lane, which soon gives to the open moor. Or another path leads from the church by a wonderful Fairy Glen up to Cloutsham, among the moors; to Cloutsham Farm, a fine thatched gable-ended building, and Cloutsham Ball, the hill where the first staghound meet of each season takes place.

Farther down the valley towards Porlock, the Minehead road passes through another village notable for its beauty. Never a very straight road, never quite level, there is one place where it takes a sudden twist and a dip down a cottage-lined hill, then another twist over a bridge and Brandish Street is left behind. A sweet bit of country this, with an old mill hiding in an orchard behind the cottages, and the clear mill stream, with its shallow stone-strewn bed where you may see that cheerful bird, the Dipper, busy about his affairs all summer long.

Still following the Porlock road, away past Brandish Street, one comes presently to more cottages, with a fine old cedar tree at the junction of the village street with the main road. This is Allerford, thought by many to be most beautiful of all Somerset villages, with its sweet white cottages, its old old pack horse bridge, backed by the dark beauty of the North Hill woods. No cottages seem so inviting as these, no gardens so soft and vivid, never such a riot of ramblers, and never thatch more deep and warm.

It is here in such places as Allerford, Luccombe and the like, that one finds the secret of Somerset, which is the secret of England. Cities cannot tell you it, nor even towns, because these are a phase only and will pass when our madness passes, but in the natural villages one still finds life untarnished, free from the veneer and the chicanery of cities.

Chapter XIII.

# "THE SHELTER OF THE HEATH."

THE glory of Exmoor lies in two things: in its colour and in its shape and lines. It is a land of purple in many shades, of gold, grey, brown and green; and softly brilliant as these colours are they are matched to perfection by the velvety outline of the hills and of the curving valley lines. For every Exmoor curve, be it never so steep, has the sweep and rhythm of a poem.

Beyond that, how can we generalise of Exmoor? Only perhaps by calling it the homely moor. It is vast; it is wild; and with a high wind driving the thunder-rain in sheets across the barren hilltops, it can be terrible. But it has none of the desolation of the Dartmoor crag-land. It is never unrelieved tragedy. Even in times of stress these great soft hills seem to offer something of shelter, the shelter of the open heath which is all that the wanderer asks.

Exmoor has personality, it is unmistakably Exmoor in every acre within its borders. The rounded hillsides knee deep in heather, ling and gorse: the long bowline of purple where the distant moor meets sky; the oak woods and thickets, head-high with gigantic bracken, a blaze of copper in the autumn; the deep, lush valleys full of pasturage and corn-land, hidden far below the weather-worn heights which give them shelter; the wild rock-strewn valley and the vivid green or sad brown morass, so innocent to look upon and yet so deadly; all these are stamped with the Exmoor mark, just as are those two valleys down which the twin Lyn streams

come to the sea, trickling and babbling among the stones in the dry season, but thundering fearfully through the rocky tree-lined clefts when swollen with winter's rains.

Oh those Exmoor streams! Dark, clear and cold, never for an instant silent save when they pause for a moment, broadening out to form a pool; clear and shallow on the moors, or dark, deep and sinister in the recesses of a wood or thicket. They are swift, ever hurrying down to their mother sea, leaping over or eddying around the rocky barriers with a song than which no music can be sweeter. Scarcely ever do the hills sweep down or cleave apart to form a seaward valley without a stream filling the gap between.

Not all of Exmoor is wild and bare. There are valleys such as Horner Valley where all is warm. Oak, underbush and bracken climb the steep hillside, shelter from rain or sun. Valleys where the air is heavy with the fragrance of many flowers, and the blackbirds, thrushes and finches sing of the joy of life to the tune of the stream tinkling down its stony bed. Places where you can forget that Nature is sometimes cruel and man in his dealings with Nature almost always so.

That is but one type of Exmoor valley. Indeed, so varied are they that the *types* must be almost as numerous as the vales are. There is Badgworthy, a long, rock-strewn passage through the moors down which a river runs. On each side the bare hills, abrupt and broken with crag and boulder, clothed with coarse heather, brambles and short dry turf, and patched with the darker green of furze. The hills continue unchanged, but as the valley broadens out towards its lower end, hedges appear and rough stone walls, where some attempt is found at pasturage more plentiful than the close brown native turf affords.

But if you see only its lovely fringes you will not know Exmoor. Vast stretches of it are wild tableland—high up and wind-swept but only gently undulating, dipping

North Moor Valley, Dulverton

Dunkery Beacon

slightly perhaps to form a boggy valley where some stream such as the Exe or Bark springs up.

If you would know this wild, lonely land you should set out to walk from Simonsbath to Porlock, but start early and take lunch with you for you will hardly see a house, you may see no human being and you will cross no road. It is a short ten miles, though hard walking; but the utter loneliness and desolation is a revelation if you have only known before the warm valleys on Exmoor skirts.

It is with little success that man has tried to tame Exmoor to his service. In the valleys where even in his absence vegetation flourishes he is welcome, but when he tries to clothe what Nature would have bare he fails.

Along the inland borders of the moor and round such villages as little wood-bowered Simonsbath, Exford and Cutcombe there sways a continual struggle between man and the wild, ebbing and flowing like the war between the seashore and the sea ; and in spite of man winning from the hollows his right to live he gains no foothold on the forbidden high ground. For which true nature lovers will be duly thankful. There is so much land, land better worth farming, too, which may be cultivated without taming one of the wildest of Nature's haunts.

The situations of the Exmoor villages are delightful. Everyone of them is a delight to those who love the old, the lasting and the simple.

There is a magic in names : Who knowing Cutcombe can hear or write the word without picturing the little wind-swept hamlet, high and lonely ? A cluster of grey stone cottages standing at the head of that deep valley between the Brendon and the Exmoor Hills, where the road runs down to little twisted Timberscombe and on to Dunster, a road cut halfway up a steep wooded slope with a fall below to the wide-bottomed valley, across which rises the unbounded moor.

Dulverton, a low-built sleepy township, claims to be

the capital of Moor-land. Truly it is a valley of delight where this jumble of red homes and grey lies hidden in the woods. Dulverton is right on the edge of the moor, so it has less the essential moorland character than has Exford—which is why Exford in its turn claims to be capital of Exmoor. You would not care to judge either claim too harshly, because both towns are so charming that you would not wish to shatter their dearest ambitions. Exford with the pretty Exe making the most of its first sight of shops and houses is a bright, cheerful little township ; snug in a wooded fold in the hills, it leaves its church to bear the full brunt of the weather on the moor above. It is here at Exford that the stag-hound kennels are. Exford is cheerful.

There is another type of moor village of more sober mind. Brendon is in Devon, but only just, and it will serve to illustrate a type. While not so large as Exford it is larger than most of its neighbours ; a collection of grey stone cottages clustered around a stream in a valley of farms and grey stone walls, with the wild moor pressing close upon it on every side. At Brendon there is an old stone bridge with one high single arch, smothered with ivy and creeping plants, which forms a picture to remember with its background of dark woods and with the river in its rocky bed below.

In your quest for beauty follow the river from Brendon up to the church at Oare. The stream, for it is no more in summer time, flows down a valley of infinite variety, of moorland turf with here and there crag breaking through, and then turning a corner the hills bow down more gently, and the lower slopes are sheltered with groves of oak and birch, reaching down to the bracken-fringed water's edge.

And still higher up the valley, after a wood so dense that within is twilight all the summer long you may come to one of those " groyles " typical of Exmoor and hardly to be found outside its borders. A gently

curved bottom, with the stream now running through luxuriant grass, and flowers of every hue where the grass sweeps up and the hills sweep down, mixing the green with the golden of blossoms and of changing bracken and with the purples of the heath.

Oare itself lies in such a valley as this but larger ; a great green cup or amphitheatre moulded in the hills. There are farms in the hollow here, a bridge and grey stone walls ; but so many trees there are that all you can see of Oare from the hilltops is the church, tiny in itself and dwarfed by the great sweep of the hills around it.

It is here at Oare that you find the true greatness of that book of Exmoor, " Lorna Doone." Exmoor life is still much as Blackmore described it for us, save that it is less lawless now. It is part of the charm of " Lorna Doone " that those legends which gave birth to it still live in the memory of the moor-folk. True it is hard to say now how much is due to Blackmore and how much to the older story, but round about Brendon, Oare and Malmsmead you may hear tales of Girt Jan Ridd, of the Doones, aye and of Squire Fagus, that never came from Blackmore's pen. The delightful atmosphere of living with romance which all this gives is heightened by the persistence of the old names, Dadds, Fry and Slowcombe ; and when you come to the little grey church at Oare you will still find the parish notices signed by " John Ridd, Churchwarden."

John Fry was right in his description of Dunkery ; " the haighest place of Hexmoor " he loved to call it. No longer is Dunkery used as a Beacon, not even by roistering Doones. But as a vantage point from which to view the country it is well worth the hard three-mile scramble up from Luccombe, the best if not the most easy way of reaching it. First through the woods through head-high bracken, then up the stiff gorse-clad hillside where heather and ling weave tangled webs about your feet ; still up, to a land of broken rocks, scorched

turf and close, wind-bitten bush and heath, until at last you reach the little rounded hilltop where boulders mark the ancient beacon height.

On every side a great stretch of country lies below you. Across the broad silver streak of the Severn rise the mountains of distant Wales. Far over the inland moors, bounding the horizon to south and west, the hills of Dartmoor and of Cornwall form a faint blue border where earth meets sky. In point of extent there can be few more magnificent views in our isles but it is not extent alone that makes the prospect from Dunkery so memorable. It has real beauty, with the hills falling back, mile after mile of soft-lined purple downs, gold where the bracken is turning, soft mauve and blue where the moors fade back in the clear upland air. To stand on Dunkery on a stormy summer day is to see Nature painting her magic pictures with a touch sure, and yet so speedy that you wonder that she never makes a mistake and gives us ugliness instead of beauty. There is no golden bracken yet, but the infinite variety of the hills themselves heightened by the quick play of light and shade, gives ever-changing newness to the scene ; where the sunshine strikes is royal purple ; there in the shadows are grey, mauve and green ; infinite variety, infinite softness and the rain storm driving over the near hills comes as a black canopy veiling their upper slopes, passing to leave a trail of glittering silver where the sun breaks through to sparkle in the myriad raindrops on the heath.

Here, in that silence which is made of Nature's sounds —the soft, singing wind, the twittering lark above and the distant call of solitary curlew, here let us leave the moor, knowing that however we may change, she changes not, save with the revolving seasons. So that whenever weary with the toil and grime of city life, we leave it all and come to her, we shall find peace, the peace of the open country—the shelter of the heath.

Porlock Village

Porlock

## Chapter XIV.

# "DOWN-AWAY BY PORLOCK VALE."

WHEN we come to an old, old village we expect to find something in it which has made it worthy to survive the years.

Porlock was a hamlet before the Saxon came, so it is more than half as old as Christianity. But because it is natural and because Nature never grows old it has the eternal freshness of Spring hidden in its heart, a freshness reminding you of the dawn wind on the hills and the swelling of buds on the hedgerows.

Porlock is natural, that seems the essence of its charm. Coming down the hill to it (and unless you come from the sea you must come down a hill), the jumble of grey roofs and thatch, wondrous stone chimneys—and in the midst the grey church spire, seem the inevitable picture to behold framed by the encircling hills and the woods from which you see it.

The situation of Porlock is so much a part of its charm that to describe the village the vale wherein it rests must first be described. Along the greater part of the Exmoor seaboard the moors run right to the water's edge, a wild coast of barren steep hills, cliffs of rock, close turf, scrub and sometimes seaward woods of oak. But at one place the moors stand back leaving a narrow mile of flat-land between their foothills and the sea; for perhaps two miles this flat land fronts the water and then the moors stretch out again to form a bay. Screened by the great hills of Hurlstone Point and Gore Point to seaward lies the flat-land, hedged around with the Exmoor heights,

open to every ray of sunshine, but sheltered from Nature's angry moods.

And on the landward border of this tiny plain Porlock clusters around its church ; in winter white and warm, in spring and summer hidden beneath a burden of flowers and vegetation such as no other village in our land can show. The features of Porlock that are never hid are its chimneys, wonderful West Country "outside" chimneys, with inglenooks with little windows in them that you may see the world and yet keep warm on the coldest day, if it ever is cold in Porlock. With the possible exception of its near neighbour Bossington, Porlock can claim to have the finest chimneys in all the West, a boast worth making. But Porlock is not given to boastfulness. Indeed it is only after long searching that you will find some of its choicest morsels, little by-ways built many many years ago and left, perfectly peaceful and happy, in a backwater of the village life.

The church is the only building which forces itself upon the eye in any way and that is not from any pretensions of its own, for it hides its modest bulk behind a stone wall and an ancient yew, but from its position in the centre of the village where the road, never quite sure of its direction, turns most sharply.

Almost opposite the church is Porlock's Bank, the most entirely charming money-office in the world, with its long low thatch and flower-bordered porch. A true type of West Country cottage converted to a modern use without sacrifice of character.

Porlock has never given a poet to the world, unless he has been some " mute inglorious Milton," but it has inspired some of the sweetest of songs. Coleridge wrote " Kubla Khan " at Porlock and Wordsworth loved the village too. Which thought takes us to the old Ship Inn where the two Lynton roads divide, for it was there that Southey rested and worked and spun his West Country verse. His corner by the old open

Porlock

Dunkery Beacon, from Porlock

fireplace remains almost unaltered, a splendid survival of times past.

Porlock village is long and straggling, with a penchant for sudden turns and narrowings in the streets. Then comes a gap, followed after an interval of hedge and meadow by West Porlock, smaller but even more beautiful than the parent village. Beyond this again is Porlock Weir, down a fairy road through the woods on the lower hill slopes.

However you come to it Porlock Weir is a delightful little hamlet. With a tiny harbour and the close background of Ashley Combe the white-fronted brown-thatched cottages are set off to perfection. For Porlock Weir is at the westerly extremity of Porlock plain, perched on the utmost corner of the level land and vainly endeavouring to climb the lower slopes of the hill, a feat by no means so unnecessary in times past as it might seem to be to us now; for before the building of the sea-wall the tide, with a following wind, had been known to sweep up to and over the lower homesteads.

Porlock Weir has, or rather had, a ghost, appropriately enough a Buccaneer. The story of his successful evasion of the attentions of eleven gentlemen in Holy Orders and his eventual surrender to the Vicar of Porlock is well worth reading, it is typical of old English lore.

Porlock Weir is too often the western limit for the pilgrim. To let this be so is to miss one of Exmoor's most wondrous gems; deep buried in the woods in a silent valley by the sea.

Still westward from Porlock Weir a path leads up to the woods which clothe the cliffs; and further it leads through the woods, winding along the cliff face, high above the sea which makes a murmur even here. Through the firs, larches and oaks you may see far below a white, wavering never-ending line where the surf beats on the cold brown rocks. Above the cliffs still climb in a maze

of stunted tree and underbush right to the high-moor far up the slope. For a mile or so this footpath leads on, giving us here and there, as it takes an outward curve, views of a coast of wonderful majesty. Then a sudden turn is taken where a deep combe comes down to the sea, the cliff face is left and the path leads up into Culbone Valley.

A valley of shadows this ; not cheerless but eerie, so deep, so wooded that only in height of summer does sunshine touch the stream which wanders—strangely silent for an Exmoor stream—down its centre. Up this valley, where the sides close in and grow steeper and more closely wooded, you come suddenly to a little clearing, a wilderness of rank grass and underbush hedged in by the close-pressing woods. The stream wanders across this open space, glad of a moment's light and at one side, almost lost under the towering hill above it, stands Culbone Church ; the smallest church of Somerset, and some say the smallest in our country.

A miniature of Porlock Church, with the same truncated spire set atop a tiny grey nave ; there is a still more tiny chancel and a miniature porch. Saxon hands began the work, followed later by those of more skilled craftsmen. Anywhere this tiny church would attract notice by its diminutive perfection, here in a valley so deep that only for three months in the year can the sunshine reach it, it seems a very miracle. You will wonder if any church so old has seen so little change in its surroundings as has this wee grey temple in the silent spell-woven ravine of the West.

What Blackmore did for Oare, Whyte-Melville has done for Porlock Bay in " Katerfelto." There are some memorable pictures in this book, especially those of the flat lands along the sea. It is possible to describe these low lands, but what pen can catch the glory which surrounds Porlock on the landward sides ? The long green poem men call Hawkcomb ; the deep peace of the

Horner Valley, that paradise of all created things, where the rushing stream out-sings the rustling leaves, only to be itself out-sung by the myriad birds who know these sweet-scented sun-plashed woods as home. Here every hue of flower is found so close that one wonders how it is that Nature's colours never clash. Here is velvet turf, long reedy grasses, bracken and the leaves of other seasons making a carpet for the Gods.

The road to Lynton, cut zig-zag fashion up the cliff by West Porlock, gives at each twist a new and yet more beautiful view of the curve of the bay, the great encircling hills and the little warm white homesteads below. A wonderful road is this winding along over and around the woods which cling everywhere to the precipitous hill-side; looking across the bay from here is the finest road view in our country.

The old Lynton road disdains circuitous routes, making almost a straight climb up famous Porlock Hill. High above the sea and the village, long lost from sight in the folds of the hills, these two roads join bringing you into the purple glory of rolling wild that is Exmoor.

Across the bay from Porlock Hill, over the level pasture and plough lands that once were salt sea-flats, stands the great bulk of North Hill—wooded inland, green and purple on the heights dimming to a cold brown where Hurlstone Point pushes out to the sea. A clear-cut hardy rock-footed hill, bare in outline because of the great Atlantic gales which come driving up the channel.

The contrasts in the Exmoor seaboard are sometimes startling. A bare half-mile inland from barren Hurlstone Point bulks the wind-swept height of Bossington Beacon, a bleak hill sheltering at its foot the most snug and dreamy of all Somerset's villages.

Bossington is sheltered from the sea by nothing but a broad belt of shingle, hurled up by the storms of ages; and yet it contrives to be the most peaceful home of somnolence imaginable. For pure quaintness it stands

with only Clovelly as an equal. A tiny village, its chief claim to fame is a 15th century chapel recently rescued from a farmer, in whose yard it stood and restored to its original use. Interesting though this is the artist and the lover of beauty will prefer the cottages, grey red-roofed flower-buried quaintnesses, with chimneys half as tall again and latticed windows hung around with clematis and creeper. And between the cottages and over them are the walnut trees—huge shady glistening giants spreading a spell of peace around them; the largest is a full five yards round its trunk.

There is a brook at Bossington of course, a trout stream, the conflux of the Horner and Luccombe waters; to follow it toward Allerford is to find fresh beauty; wonderful lush meadows, with ever the woods of the great hill forming a sheltering barrier towards the North. Who, standing beneath the shelter of these woods where only a rustling denotes the passing wind, can realise that just above are the bare moors which the wind wipes clean of trees, leaving only such low-growing things as gorse and ling, which will respect his majesty and hinder not his sweeping.

So Porlock stands in its magic vale, a home to some, a place of pilgrimage for many—and a treasured memory for all such as love Nature's ways and the kindlier ways of man. A memorial for all those who can put contention aside when beauty shows forth and say in their hearts while gazing on it that Beauty is Love, and Love is God.

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